

Joe Phenix's Great Blue Diamond Case!

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BY ALBERT W. AIKEN.

The New York Sport at Long Branch;

Or, BLOCKING THE BURLESQUE ACTRESS'S GAME.



IT WAS ROCKY MOUNTAIN JIM. "THERE HAS BEEN MURDER DONE," THE REPORTER CRIED.

The New York Sport at Long Branch;

OR,

BLOCKING THE BURLESQUE ACTRESS'S GAME.

A Romance of the Great Metropolis.

BY ALBERT W. AIKEN,

AUTHOR OF "THE JOE PHENIX" DETECTIVE
TALES, "THE FRESH OF FRISCO" RO-
MANCES, AND THE "DICK TAL-
BOT" SERIES.

CHAPTER I.

BY THE SOUNDING SEA.

LONG BRANCH, on the New Jersey coast, the famous watering place which in the time when Grant was President used to be termed the "summer capital" by the brainy men who wield the pen in the interest of the great American newspapers.

Long Branch is not quite so popular now as it used to be in those great days of yore, still, it is one of the leading American summer resorts, thanks more to its proximity to New York than to the natural advantages which it possesses.

It was at the close of an extremely warm July day that we transport the reader, in imagination, to this gay summer city by the shores of old ocean.

On the morrow the Monmouth Park races were to begin, and already the hotels were filled to overflowing.

The sports had come, who make a business of "following the races;" the horse-owners, whose costly steeds were to contend upon the oval track; the idle men of wealth, both young and old, who come for the purpose of passing away the time, which is so often apt to hang heavy on the hands of men who have so much money that they do not have to take upon their shoulders the cares of business, and sometimes do not really know what to do with themselves, and last, though not least, the bookmakers, the pleasant, jovial gentlemen, without whom the races would lose about all their interest, for the average man goes to a race track for the purpose of betting, and if he could not find a chance to risk his money would be very apt, in the slang of the day, to declare that the affair was N. G.

The crack men of the press, too, were on hand, for on the morrow the Monmouth Cup was to be run, the great race of the meeting, with half a hundred horses entered for the rich prize.

By this time, of course, it was understood that only about a dozen of the fifty would start, and speculation was busy as to who would prove the winner, for there were some "dark horses" from the South and West, in regard to whose capabilities the public at large knew but little.

The newspaper men—keen, cunning blades—had done their best to ascertain which horse was likely to carry off the rich stake, for it would be a great card for any of the enterprising journals to say, with a great flourish of trumpets, the day after the race:

"Aha! didn't our turf prophet predict the result, and our readers who follow the races are 'in it,' while the misguided unfortunates who are weak enough to patronize the other newspapers are weeping and bemoaning their ill luck this morning. Moral: Buy this journal and you will be happy!"

Upon the broad veranda of the West End Hotel, the popular headquarters of the great racing men, a large crowd was congregated.

The busses were arriving from the afternoon train, and the people upon the veranda were engaged in scanning the new-comers as they alighted.

There were not chairs enough to accommodate a quarter of the people on the spacious veranda, and so there was a constant stream of humanity passing up and down.

Two well-dressed gentlemen encountered each other. There was a glance of recognition, and then the two greeted warmly.

One was a tall, rather stout man, well advanced in years—sixty or sixty-five, probably—with an imposing head, crowned with iron gray locks, which curled in little crispy

ringlets; his face was smoothly shaven, and he had the air of a man who amounted to something.

In his case appearances were certainly not deceptive, for this was the well-known writer, Brewster Kinsade, who under his pen name of "King Lear" had won a reputation as being the foremost newspaper man of the day.

He had been everywhere, and knew everybody; from the presidential mansion, the famous White House, down to the humble beer cellar in Park Row where the "blamed literary fellows," as a plain-spoken, and venerable "statesman" once termed them, are wont to congregate, he was a welcome guest.

And it was no wonder, for a more agreeable companion, or entertaining gentleman, lived not on the earth.

The new-comer who had accosted this mighty dean of the newspaper guild was a direct contrast to him in every respect.

He was a tall, slender young fellow, of twenty-five or thereabouts, with an olive-hued complexion, dark hair and eyes, and an expert skilled in guessing nationalities from appearances would have set him down for a Creole from New Orleans.

And this was the truth.

Jefferson Clairborne was his name, and he was one of the young fellows who have grown up since "the war," and on the ruins of his father's fortune, who had been killed in the struggle, had succeeded in making more money than any of his long line of prominent ancestors had ever possessed.

He was a fine specimen of the men of the New South—those who have regenerated the barren places, wasted by war's unrelenting hand, and made the land to again blossom like the rose.

"This is Mr. Kinsade, if I am not mistaken?" the young Southerner observed as he extended his hand to the other.

"Correct, sir, and you are Jefferson Clairborne, of New Orleans?" the veteran newspaper man replied:

"Yes, sir; but, really, when I caught sight of you I was in doubt whether to speak or not, for I thought it doubtful if you would remember me," the young man explained.

"My dear Mr. Clairborne, it is part of my business never to forget a face, or a name!" the other declared.

"But we only encountered each other once," the Southerner reminded.

"I remember the circumstance perfectly. It was at the St. Charles Hotel. Major Poin-dexter of the *Picayune* introduced us, and then we had a mint-julep together.

"By the way, is that same barkeeper still at the St. Charles—a little dark-faced fellow with a monkey look, but, oh! how he could mix a julep!"

And the veteran smacked his lips as though even now the flavor of the delightful concoction was on his palate.

"Tony?"

"Yes, that was the name."

"He is still there."

"It is almost worth a trip to Orleans to drink one of Tony's juleps!"

"But I am glad to meet you, Mr. Clairborne!" the veteran continued. "You did the honors in the South and now I will have an opportunity to return the favor," the newspaper man remarked, with courtly dignity.

"I am pleased to meet some one I know, for this is my first visit to the North, and so far, until I encountered you, I had not seen a familiar face."

"I shall be very glad indeed to show you around," Kinsade declared. "And I can assure you, Mr. Clairborne, you might find a far worse guide than I will prove."

"I do not doubt that in the least, and it is my thought that I would have to go far to find a man who is as well-posted as yourself," the Creole rejoined.

"Much obliged for the compliment," with a courteous bow.

"But, to use the common saying, I believe I do 'know the ropes' as well as any of the boys. I suppose you came down to see the races?"

"Yes, I take a particular interest in this meeting for I have a horse entered."

"Ah, yes, yes! I remember now, Southern Girl, J. Clairborne!" the newspaper man exclaimed. "How stupid of me when I

noted that entry that it did not recall you to my mind, particularly when I knew the horse was from the South, and was said to carry a good deal of Southern money!"

"Well, even Jove was said to nod, sometimes," the Southerner observed with a smile.

"Very true, and I don't doubt that it is a fact, too."

"Well, how is your mare getting on? She is looked upon as one of the dark horses, and the 'talent,' as the men who make a living by following the races, and picking the winners are called, seem to be considerably exercised over the animal, for although, as a rule, they contrive to find out all the particulars regarding the beasts entered in the big races, yet they appear to be all at sea about your mare."

The Creole laughed.

"I do not wonder at their being puzzled for I don't really know how good an animal she is myself. She is only a three year old, you know, and has started but once this season, then the track happened to be a perfect mud-hole and she is one of the horses who cannot run in the mud, so she finished away back in the ruck."

"And she did not run many times as a two year old?"

"No, she only started once, at Lexington, Kentucky, and won in good company in a canter; but, after that race, she went amiss and I was obliged to turn her out."

"She is literally then a dark horse; but, by the way, here are a couple of chairs, so let us seize upon them!"

CHAPTER II.

THE TALE OF A GILDED YOUTH.

THE keen eyed quill-driver had noticed a couple vacating the chairs, and was prompt to take possession of them.

After he and Clairborne were seated the conversation was resumed.

"As I was saying, the talent are all at sea in regard to this cup race, for there are half a dozen dark horses in it, and it does not seem possible for the keenest 'touts' to get a line on them," Kinsade remarked.

"Yes, I am aware of that fact, but it is owing to the horses being from the South and West, and the most of them, like my mare, have shown one or two good races, but have not done enough to allow any one to judge just how good, or bad, they are."

"But I noticed that your Southern Girl started in the betting at 50 to 1, and now the pencilers are not willing to do better than 20 to 1 against her," the newspaper man observed.

"That is on account of the Southern money coming in to back her," the Creole explained. "When the bookmakers started to offer such odds as that I was prompt to put in all the money that I could get them to take."

"I don't wonder at it!" Kinsade declared.

"If you had an idea that your mare stood any chance to win, accepting odds of 50 to 1 was like picking up money."

"Yes, all I could get on was a thousand, and I used a great deal of strategy, too, in placing the money, putting it on in small sums through other parties; but it did not take these sporting gentlemen long to discover that some one had faith enough in Southern Girl to put up money on her, and the price tumbled to 20 to 1 immediately."

"By to-night I will have another thousand on her at those odds, and if the bookmakers are willing to give more than 5 to 1 to-morrow I shall be astonished," the young man continued.

"You stand a chance then to land seventy thousand dollars if the mare wins," Kinsade computed.

"Yes, and all I risk is two thousand; but I shall put a couple of thousand more on her to-morrow, though, if I can get as good as five to one, and if the mare wins it will look a good deal like a hog-killing, as the talent say," the Creole announced, with a laugh.

"Doldale is the favorite, Van Courtlandt's horse," the veteran remarked.

"Yes, five to four is the best that the betting men will give, and I don't wonder at it, for Doldale is a good performer; but these shrewd bookmakers sometimes make mistakes in playing horses on their form, with-

out taking into consideration all the circumstances," the Southerner observed.

"You are quite correct in that statement," the newspaper veteran assured. "Book-makers are only men, and are sometimes carried away by their imaginations."

"That is my argument," Clairborne admitted. Now in this case of Doldale, there is no doubt that he is the best three-year old of his year, but he has been campaigned pretty hard, and the best of horses will go amiss if he is kept on edge for too long a time."

"Ah, yes; how true that is."

"And then, Doldale is carrying the top weight, one hundred and thirty pounds, giving my mare thirty pounds, for her weight is only one hundred, and the Cup course is a mile and three-quarters, and I tell you, Mr. Kinsade, it takes an extra good horse to carry a big weight like that for a mile and three-quarters."

"Very true, very true indeed," the veteran declared. "An animal might manage to carry a crushing weight for a mile, or even a mile and a half, but when it comes to the extra quarter it breaks their heart."

"That is my calculation. Then here is another point which must be taken into consideration. Doldale is by the Emperor, an imported English horse, very high-priced, of excellent breeding, and a good performer at short distances in England, but in this country he never ran, as he went amiss in training and was sent to the stud."

"Doldale's mother was a Glencove mare, another speedy beast at a mile but worthless at any great distance, while Doldale himself has never shown that he could negotiate a mile and three quarters with the ease with which he can cover a mile."

"You observed my argument: Doldale, and his sire and dam, are all milers, while my mare traces directly back to Lexington by both dam and sire; to Lexington, the champion four miler, and the best horse at that distance that ever trod on shodden hoof in this or any other country!"

"I appreciate the force of your contention; your mare can stay the distance while Doldale cannot with the weight he is forced to carry."

"That is my idea, and I think it is a sound one."

"It certainly seems to be so. I see that you go at this thing in a scientific way instead of rushing ahead blindly as the average man certainly does."

"It comes naturally to us Southerners to handle horses, I believe," the Creole assumed.

"Then, too, though I was born in New Orleans I was brought up in Kentucky in the beautiful blue grass region, where almost every man, woman and child is interested in horses."

"Do you know Van Courtlandt, Doldale's owner?" Kinsade asked.

"No, I never met him."

"He is one of the notable men of New York, a young fellow of five-and-twenty, who inherited a million of dollars from his father, and about the time he had managed to get through the money his mother died and left him another million."

"A lucky fellow!"

"Oh, yes, one of the kind who was most certainly born with a golden spoon in his mouth; but they say that he has thrown away his money so lavishly, and bet such an enormous sum upon Doldale, being sure that his horse will win the cup, that, if the horse loses the race, Van Courtlandt will be a ruined man."

"A man is not wise to stake all he possesses upon a single event," the Creole remarked with a grave shake of the head.

"Ah, this Alex Van Courtlandt is a gay boy and he is anything but wise," the newspaper man vowed. "Personally he is a jolly good fellow, bright and intelligent, a splendid companion, and if he had been born a poor man undoubtedly would have made a name in the world, but his wealth has been his ruin."

"He doesn't know the value of money, eh?"

"That is it exactly; though as he is a noble, generous fellow with the heart of a prince, a regular nature's nobleman, if there ever was one, he has always made ducks and drakes of his money, and for a year past he has been

indulging in a most expensive amusement," the veteran explained.

"Are you much of a theater-goer?" Kinsade asked, abruptly.

"Oh, yes," I am very fond of the theater, and always attend when I am in a large city."

"Possibly then you have heard of the famous English burlesque actress, Dolly Ragsdale?"

"Yes; I saw her half-a-dozen times last winter when she played in New Orleans, a really charming creature! Half the men in Orleans were over head and ears in love with her."

The newspaper man laughed.

"Ah, yes, that is the way it usually goes!" he declared.

"She is a fine type of the buxom English girl, not much of an actress, no great shakes of a singer, only a fair dancer, yet she manages to rake in a goodly harvest of American dollars," Kinsade continued.

"Well, to come to the point, when Miss Ragsdale came to this country with her burlesque company a little over a year ago, one of the first conquests she made was Alex Van Courtlandt; and ever since that time he has been her most devoted admirer. In fact, it is commonly reported, and generally believed, that Van Courtlandt would marry the lady to-morrow if she would only consent to have him."

"He certainly must be infatuated then," the Creole remarked. "For although I believe the girl bears a good reputation, yet for a man in Van Courtlandt's station to marry a woman of this kind would be simply an act of folly."

"Oh, yes, no doubt about that, and it is an unmistakable fact that Van Courtlandt is completely infatuated with the girl, and has squandered his money on her in the most lavish manner."

"Why he even named his horse after her. Doldale is a compound derived from Dolly Ragsdale."

"Ah, yes, I see."

"If you like I will introduce you to Van Courtlandt this evening, and then you can see for yourself just what kind of a fellow he is."

"I shall be glad to make his acquaintance," the Creole replied.

The gong rung for dinner at this point and interrupted the conversation.

The two went in together and enjoyed the meal, the veteran pointing out the notable people to the Southerner.

CHAPTER III.

IN THE GAMBLING-DEN.

AFTER the meal was ended the two repaired to the piazza again and lit their cigars.

"We ought to run across Van Courtlandt pretty soon," Kinsade remarked.

"He makes this hotel his headquarters, although he spends about half his time at Miss Ragsdale's cottage."

"Has she a cottage here?"

"Oh, yes, and keeps open house for her friends after the style of a woman who is worth a million; rumor says that Van Courtlandt is paying the bills."

"You see he is honest in his idea of marrying the girl, and like many another man thinks he can win her heart by lavishing his money upon her."

"Sometimes it is a mistake to go ahead in that fashion," the Creole asserted.

"Yes, if the woman is at all on the siren order, for she will lead a man on, and after his money is gone then she has no further use for him."

Just then a friend of Kinsade came along, another newspaper man, and the veteran inquired if he had seen anything of Van Courtlandt.

"You will find him over at the Virginia Club-house," the other replied. "I heard him say that he was disgusted that the book-makers would not do any better than 5 to 4 on his horse, and as he had a couple of thousand dollars, he didn't know what to do with, he was going over to break the bank."

"More likely that the bank will break him!" Kinsade surmised, at which the other laughingly assented and passed on.

The veteran then explained that the so-called Virginia Club-house was merely a first-class gambling-place, run by one Peter

Weekly, who bore the reputation of being the boss New York sporting man.

"Peter is a very nice fellow," the newspaper man explained. "And no one from his appearance would ever take him to be a sporting man; but suppose we go over and take a look at the place," Kinsade suggested.

"I shall be pleased to do so," the Creole assented.

"Peter and I are on good terms," Kinsade explained. "I have known him for over twenty years, and have always found him to be a good, square fellow."

"All the *attaches* of the house know me, and I walk in and out as if I had an interest in the place."

"You understand, I presume, that the doors of this club-house are not open to every one who applies. Peter runs a big concern; he does not care for the small fry, and no one can gain admittance to his club-house without being properly introduced."

"He treats his guests in the most lavish manner. At eleven o'clock each night a magnificent game supper is served; the finest of wines and liquors are always displayed on a sideboard, and each guest is at liberty to help himself to all he wants, just the same as if he was in his own house."

"I comprehend; a really first-class institution of the kind."

"Yes, decidedly so; and there is no obligation for the guest to play unless he feels inclined."

"Now take myself, for instance. I never ventured a dollar in the house, and when I happened to say to Weekly once that it wasn't quite the cheese for me to drink his wine and eat his supper without risking a dollar or two in order to give him a chance to get the pay for it, he replied, 'Old fellow, I don't want you to play. You are no big enough game for me. I don't run this place to catch fifty or hundred dollar men, for, as a rule, such men cannot afford to lose their money; but the men who blow in five hundred or a thousand are wealthy fellows who can stand the pressure.'"

"Yes, yes, I comprehend, and I should like to see what the place is like," Clairborne observed.

"Come on, then."

And the two started.

The club-house was only about ten minutes' walk from the hotel, and it did not take the two long to cover the distance.

The muscular negro, dressed in a full evening suit, who guarded the door, received the newspaper man with the utmost cordiality. Evidently he was an honored guest.

As Clairborne had anticipated from Kinsade's description, the club-house was fitted up in the most elegant manner, and when the proprietor espied the newspaper man he left the gentleman with whom he was conversing and came forward to greet him.

Then, when Clairborne was introduced, after a brief conversation, it was discovered that the old sport had been well acquainted with the Creole's father, for before the beginning of the war Weekly had kept a place in New Orleans, and so the sport was able to tell the son a great many things in regard to the father, which he did after they went to Weekly's private parlor, then the conversation turned upon the great race which was to take place on the morrow, and it got to be eleven o'clock before either of the three had any idea of it.

"By the way," the newspaper man remarked after making the discovery of how time had flown, I came over for the express purpose of introducing Mr. Clairborne to Alex Van Courtlandt, as I heard that Van had started for the club."

"Yes, he is here up-stairs in one of the poker rooms having a regular duel at cards with an old California gambler, Jim Mountain, familiarly called Rocky Mountain Jim," the old sport explained.

"Van Courtlandt happened to remark to me in Rocky's hearing that he had a couple of thousand dollars that he wanted to get rid of, and the California man promptly replied that he was in the same fix himself, and proposed a little game of poker; the New Yorker accepted, and they have been hard at it ever since, I presume. If you like we will take a look at them and see how they are getting along."

The others signified their approval of this proposal and the three went up-stairs to the rooms set apart for the accommodation of "short card" players.

As the veteran had expected the New Yorker and the old California gambler were hard at it.

There was a great contrast between the two men. Alexander Van Courtlandt was a typical representative of the swell New Yorker. He was a tall, good-looking fellow, with regular features, clear blue eyes, blonde hair and a small mustache of the same hue.

The only bad thing about the face was the mouth and chin, which seemed to indicate weakness and indecision.

The Californian was a tall, lathy sort of a fellow, a man of fully fifty, with a thin face, which was smoothly shaven, and from his peculiar grave look a stranger would have been much more likely to take him to be a minister, or a school-teacher, than an all around sport.

There was as much contrast in the way the men were dressed, too, as in their looks. Van Courtlandt's appearance showed that he was an extra good customer of some fashionable tailor, while the Californian wore a sober black suit.

"How goes the game, gentlemen?" Weekly inquired, as he entered.

"Well, I am about cleaned out," Rocky Mountain Jim answered, shaking his head in a melancholy way. "This gentleman has been too much for me to-night, and if he takes this 'pot' it will end my fun."

"I think I have got the cards to do it," Van Courtlandt announced. "And as an earnest of what I am going to do I will put up a hundred."

"Well, I have got fair cards this time, but as I have not got the wealth to come back at you the way I would like to do I will 'see' your hundred, which exhausts my pile, and 'call' you. What have you got?" the Californian asked.

"Four tens!" Van Courtlandt replied, displaying the cards.

"Good-enough!" the other cried in a disgusted way, throwing his cards on the pack.

"Hard lines, my noble lord!" he continued. "I started in with three jacks, and had hopes of either catching the other jack, or a pair in the 'draw,' but it didn't work that way."

"In fact, I think I am justified in saying that a man doesn't often run up against a harder streak of luck than that which I have been playing in for the last couple of weeks."

"Are you cleaned out, Rocky?" the old gambler asked.

"Yes, I am about down to the bedrock, and I don't believe I would have a cent left if I had not taken the precaution to give the clerk of the hotel a hundred to put away in the safe for me, and I gave him strict orders, too, not to allow me to have it until to-morrow no matter how urgently I might ask for it," the Californian announced.

"That is a good idea," Weekly remarked.

"You are an old time sport yourself, Peter, and you know how it is," Rocky Mountain Jim assumed. "Things have not been coming my way for two weeks now. When I landed in New York I could have cleaned up a good ten thousand dollars, for I had been having as good a run of luck as any man would want; then, all of a sudden, things changed right around, and I couldn't win a stake, no matter how hard I tried."

"Luck will work that way sometimes," the old sport observed.

"I am not inclined to be superstitious, but I have a sort of an idea that I got my bad luck from a young Englishman whom I met. He was a wild blade and had the next room to me in the hotel. It is my notion that he thought I was a flat," with a sly chuckle, "for he bantered me into playing poker with him, and, of course, I cleaned him out in short order."

"We got through the game about midnight, and as I noticed that he seemed dreadfully discouraged I offered to lend him a stake if he had gone broke."

"Acting like a true sport," Weekly added. "The man in our line, who knows his business, will never take a man's last dollar, and let him go out into the world without a cent for food and shelter," he continued.

"You are right! A man who will do business in that way is a shark and no true sport."

"Well, this young fellow thanked me for my offer, but said he was so fixed that he did not need any money, so I bid him good-night and marched off with my spoils."

"I went down-stairs and got a drink as a night-cap, you know. Then came up to go to bed, and, just as I got to the door of my room I heard groans coming from the room of this young man. He had not locked his door so I got in without trouble."

"He lay in the bed, deathly pale, and a little vial, which stood on a table by the bed, told the story."

"Suicide, eh?" Weekly asked.

"Yes; and as soon as I discovered what was the matter I told him, as he was still conscious, that I would run for a doctor, but he replied that it was no use, for he had taken such a dose that all the doctors in the land could not do anything for him."

"Besides, he did not want to live. The officers of justice were after him, he said, and that was the reason he got me to play cards—he hoped to win money enough to enable him to get to some foreign land where it would not be possible for the bloodhounds to get at him."

"Well, he was a bad egg!" Weekly opined.

"He was so weak that it was as much as he could do to speak, but he managed to tell me that he had been a grand rascal, plundering people right and left, but all that remained of his spoils was a blue diamond ring, which he hoped I would take and return to the owner."

"Then he managed to get it out of his pocket—it was in this case," the Californian explained, producing a small jewel-box. "He placed it in my hand, gave a gasp, and passed over the Great Divide, as we say in the Mountain region."

"Quite a romantic tale," Van Courtlandt observed.

"Oh, yes, just like a novel. Well, I held on to the sparkler, for I suspected from the fact of his telling me he had only been in America a couple of days when I met him that he had got the diamond abroad, so it was not likely the owner was in this country, and it was my opinion that I would be more likely to get it back to the hands of the original possessor by wearing it, so people could see the jewel, than by surrendering it to the hands of the police."

"Yes, you were right; I think I would have acted in that way myself," Weekly admitted.

"But, here is the jewel," and the Californian opened the box.

CHAPTER IV.

THE BLUE DIAMOND.

ALL four gentlemen uttered a cry of surprise as the jewel met their eyes.

It was a diamond, but not clear white, or even with a yellow tinge, as the precious stones sometimes appear, but with a decided bluish cast.

It was fully as large as a filbert and "cut" in the highest style of the jeweler's art.

A more magnificent stone no one of the party had ever seen.

"Upon my word, this goes a little ahead of anything in the diamond line I have seen for some time," Weekly averred. "Why, this stone must be worth a good five thousand dollars!"

"Yes, it is easily worth that, I think," Van Courtlandt remarked, with the air of a man who thought he knew something about such things.

"I fancy from what the Englishman said that he got this stone in India, as he told me that he had come from Calcutta by way of California, for, according to his stories, he had been about all over the world, and I fancy from what little he let slip that he had played the shark for some time."

"I should not be surprised if this stone had a history," the newspaper man now interposed. "Blue diamonds are very rare, and a jewel of this size and beauty would be highly prized in India, where the native rulers, the rajahs and begums, go in heavily for this sort of thing."

"I made up my mind to wear it, knowing it would excite attention, but I have always made it a rule to dress so plainly that I rather shrank from displaying such an elegant jewel as this on my finger," the old gambler explained. "But to-morrow I will

make the boys on the race-track open their eyes, for I will display the head-light."

"It is magnificent," Weekly exclaimed, in deep admiration. "A handsomer stone I never saw."

The others echoed the opinion.

"Maybe wearing this elegant ornament will change my luck," the Californian hinted. "But I am a little doubtful about it, for it is only since it came into my possession that things have been going so badly, and as I am inclined to be a little superstitious, like all men in my line, the thought came to me that the diamond may be 'hoodooed,' and that is why I haven't been able to do anything since I had it."

All laughed at this conceit, which the old gambler advanced with perfect seriousness.

"Well, I'll tell you what I will do, Rocky," Weekly remarked. "I will take the diamond off your hands, and give you three or four thousand for it, any time you like, and risk the bad luck."

"Oh, I wouldn't sell it!" the Californian protested. "Besides, it wouldn't really be a square deal to take your money, for the rightful owner may put in a claim for the diamond at any time, for I could not give any title to the thing, you know."

"That is true; I didn't think of that."

"Well, gentlemen, I must be going," and the Californian arose as he spoke. "If I take a streak of luck at the races to-morrow, I shall look to you, Mr. Van Courtlandt, to give me my revenge as soon as possible."

"Certainly, of course, I shall be delighted," the New Yorker replied.

Then the Californian departed.

After he had gone Kinsade introduced the Creole to Van Courtlandt, when all went down-stairs and took a glass of wine with the proprietor.

Van Courtlandt happened to look at the clock.

"Hello! it is getting well on to midnight," he exclaimed. "I must be going, for I want to get up early in the morning."

"Where are you staying, Mr. Clairborne?" he asked.

"At the West End," the Creole answered.

"I have quarters there, too, so we can proceed in company, and you are there also, aren't you, Kinsade?"

"Yes, the West End is my old stamping-ground."

The three bid the proprietor good-night and started for the hotel.

The club-house was situated on one of the cross streets running from Ocean avenue—as the main drive along the sea—Long Branch's great thoroughfare is called—inland, and as it was in a rather retired spot, the road was a somewhat lonely one after nightfall, as there were only a few houses for a good sixteenth of a mile.

Then, too, the roadway was fringed with trees, and although there was a full moon yet the way was dark on account of the shadows thrown by the leafy wood monarchs.

The three went on their way, chatting as they walked, when they were startled by a cry of alarm from down the road in the direction of the village.

"Hello! what is that?" the newspaper man demanded.

"Sounds as if some one was getting hurt!" Van Courtlandt replied.

"Decidedly so!" the Creole assented.

The three halted, when almost immediately there came the sound of two shots.

"There is mischief afoot for that was the short, quick bark of a pistol!" Kinsade cried.

And, actuated by a common impulse, the three hastened down the road as fast as they could run.

A half thousand yards away they came upon a man prostrate by the side of the way.

The two started in astonishment as they halted, startled by the sight.

It was Rocky Mountain Jim.

"There has been murder done!" the reporter cried.

He was evidently badly hurt, but was still able to speak, and recognized the three as they bent over him.

Two dueling pistols were on the ground, one near to the prostrate man, and from this fact the new-comers guessed that it was he who had fired the shots.

"I have been assaulted and robbed," he gasped. "A fellow was lying for me in the bushes—he jumped out as I came along and

gave me an awful clip on the head; for the moment I was nearly stunned, and I went down; then the galoot went through me and got the diamond, but, as he started off I managed to get out my guns. I missed him the first time but the second I think I plugged him for keeps.

"Out on the Pacific Slope a man has got to be quick on the 'draw,' and a good shot with a gun in order to hold his own in my business; it was reckoned that I wasn't any slouch, and unless I have made a big mistake I 'got' my man all right!"

There was a deal of grim satisfaction in the old gambler's voice as he spoke.

"How are you—badly hurt?" Kinsade asked, as he bent over the stricken man.

"Oh, yes; I reckon I have got my ticket for the happy hunting-grounds," the aged sporting man replied, faintly, and as he spoke it was evident that he was growing much fainter.

"But, take a look at the rascal," he continued, speaking with considerable force. "He got my diamond, but I got him!"

"Look for the blue sparkler—and if you find it, take the jewel, Van Courtlandt, and wear it until you come across the rightful owner."

"Curse that Englishman! I wish I had never seen him, for I have had nothing but bad luck ever since—curse him!"

And then the strength of the stricken man seemed to suddenly fail him, for he closed his eyes with a moan of pain.

"He is hard hit!" the newspaper man decided, his experienced eyes quickly detecting the truth.

"I reckon he was about right when he said that he wasn't long for this world. I was through the war as a newspaper correspondent, and I have seen too many men shuffle off this mortal coil not to be able to detect the approach of the grim king of terrors when he comes in all his awful majesty."

"It is that—an awful tragedy," Van Courtlandt added, in a hushed voice.

"Yes, I fear he is beyond all mortal help."

"But, let us take a look at the man who did the deed," the newspaper man urged, "for yonder he lies under the bushes, I think. At the same time we can keep our eyes opened for the diamond."

The three hastened to the apparently senseless form, all doubled up under the bushes.

CHAPTER V.

A SUPERSTITION.

THE man's body was half in among the bushes but his head protruded, and the face, up-turned, so that the rays of the moonlight fell upon it, was ghastly white.

He was a ruffianly-looking young fellow of twenty-five or thereabouts, poorly dressed, and still clutched in his hand the "life-preserver," with which he had dealt the blow which had laid the Californian low. The "life-preserver," to give the murderous weapon the name by which it is commonly known in England, from which country it originally came, was a ball of lead, about as big as an English walnut, with a strong handle composed of a stout wire, the entire thing being covered with leather. A more effective weapon for the highway footpad, who lies in wait in dark corners for his victim, could hardly be devised.

"This is the contrivance which did the damage," the veteran journalist remarked, pointing to the peculiar club.

"And from the fact of the man possessing a weapon of this kind it is plain that he is a regular professional, probably an importation from across the water. I should judge so from his looks, for he has the appearance of an English crook."

Clairborne knelt by the side of the prostrate man and placed his hand on his pulse.

"Looks as if he was stone dead," the young man announced.

"I would be willing to bet a good round sum that the old sport drove a ball right through his heart, although the fellow had his back to him, and was running away as fast as possible," Kinsade declared. "The unfortunate rascal paid dearly enough for the diamond!"

"But, by the way, where is the jewel?" inquired the journalist.

As he spoke his eyes fell upon the jewel-

box which had been forced from the hands of the thief by the violence of his fall, when the revolver bullet had so suddenly pierced his heart.

"Aha! there is the box!" but when the newspaper man picked it up the discovery was made that it was empty!

"Hello! the diamond is gone!" "But it must be near at hand!" he continued.

"There it is!" Van Courtlandt exclaimed. "See where it sparkles in the middle of the road."

"Yes, lying there for all the world like a common pebble, but pebbles worth five or ten thousand dollars are not to be met with every day."

"Pick it up, Van, and here is the case," the journalist ordered. "It is your property now, for both Clairborne and I bear witnesses that Rocky Mountain Jim left it to your care until the original owner should put in an appearance."

"Well, I presume I might as well accept the trust, and then, if the rightful owner does not put in an appearance I shall be so much in pocket," Van Courtlandt remarked as he took up the beautiful stone from its bed of dust.

"That is so! no doubt about that, and if, as Rocky Mountain Jim supposed, the Englishman came from India, and got the stone in that far-away country, the odds are about a thousand to one that the owner will never come to claim it," the old newspaper man suggested.

"This fellow is gone so there isn't any need of our troubling our heads about him," Clairborne spoke, "but we had better take a look at the old sport and see how he is getting on."

Van Courtlandt put the diamond in its case, and then all three returned to the Californian.

He was lying in the same position, not having moved since the three left him, and the moonbeams were playing full upon his face.

Kinsade was in the advance and got a good look at the pale face of the veteran sport.

"By the everlasting hills! gentlemen, I am afraid that the Pacific Sloper is a goner!" the newspaper man exclaimed.

It was as they suspected. Rocky Mountain Jim had played his last card, cashed in his last check, and the game of life interested him no more.

"Let me see now how we had better proceed," Kinsade remarked, reflectively. "One of us ought to warn the police while the other two remain to see that no harm comes to the body."

"Suppose I go and give notice to the police," Van Courtlandt suggested. "I am personally acquainted with the chief, and will be pretty sure to find him at the West End Hotel, for he is a great racing man and hand-in-glove with all the bookmakers."

"All right," Kinsade assented. "And while on your mission Mr. Clairborne and I will keep watch here."

The New Yorker hurried away.

The two watched the young man until his figure vanished in the gloom, then the journalist spoke:

"It will be a good half an hour before we will be relieved under the most favorable circumstances, so we may as well prepare to make ourselves comfortable. There is a turf bank over there on the other side of the road which will afford us a seat."

"A good idea," and the two crossed the road and seated themselves upon the sloping bank.

"Well, I have seen some strange affairs in my time, but this is about as peculiar as any that ever came under my notice, which is saying a good deal, Mr. Clairborne."

"I agree with you: it is a remarkably strange circumstance," the Creole coincided, "and possibly you may think I am inclined to be superstitious, but if I were Van Courtlandt I should not care to accept the charge of this blue diamond."

"I understand; the same thought has occurred to you which came to me, and that is to the effect that this blue diamond is an unlucky stone which will bring misfortune to whoever possesses it," the old newspaper man admitted. "The idea may be absurd, and a man ought not to give way to any superstition of the kind, but as

I was brought up in the very hot-bed of Hoodooism, I suppose I am rather inclined to attach more weight to a matter of this kind than it really deserves."

"Well, a large number of great men have been much given to superstition if history is to be believed, and we need not go back to the dark ages to find the record either," Kinsade remarked.

"Take Napoleon for instance. No man of judgment will accuse him of being weak-minded; yet he was extremely superstitious in regard to certain things, putting a great deal of faith in signs and omens."

"I am aware of the fact, and quite a number of other distinguished men have believed in supernatural warnings," Clairborne asserted. "Take the men in my section. I am acquainted with a number of sober, level-headed business men who are firm believers in luck, and decidedly superstitious, and although I never thought I was much given that way, yet owing to the peculiar chain of events connected with this blue diamond I am rather inclined to the opinion that it brings bad-luck to the person who had it."

"It would certainly seem so, for here are three men who have met untimely deaths with the blue diamond in their possession," Kinsade affirmed, "and I am just foolish enough to bet all the money I can raise against Van Courtlandt's horse to-morrow, going on the idea that the blue diamond will bring him bad luck, too."

"Well, I shall be inclined to follow your example," Clairborne admitted, "but don't you think we ought to tell him our ideas in regard to this matter?"

"Yes, that will be right, although he may laugh at us for our pains," Kinsade replied.

CHAPTER VI.

A WARNING.

THE approach of a couple of gentlemen, who had been trying their luck at the clubhouse, interrupted the conversation.

The pair were startled by the sight of the dead body, with its white and ghastly face staring up at the round, full moon.

As it happened, the veteran journalist was acquainted with one of the gentlemen, and so he took pains to relate all the particulars, and by the time that Kinsade finished the recital, the sound of a carriage, approaching at a rapid pace from the direction of Ocean avenue, came to their ears.

"I should not be surprised if that was Van Courtlandt, with the chief of police, now," the journalist remarked.

Kinsade was correct in this conjecture. It was the New Yorker and the police superintendent, in a coach.

"A very bad business, gentlemen," the chief remarked, after taking a look at the bodies.

"I had an idea that this ruffian, who came to his death so suddenly, might be one of our local toughs," he continued. "We have, unfortunately, a few hard cases in our town, but this man is a stranger."

"He has the appearance of an Englishman, and the peculiar weapon he used is the favorite tool of English crooks, a life-preserver, they call it."

"You are correct in regard to that; but it does not matter much about the man's pedigree, now that he is beyond the reach of all earthly tribunals," the official observed.

"If one of you gentlemen will give me a hand and assist me to place these bodies in the coach, I will be much obliged."

It did not take long to place the bodies in the coach; then the chief said:

"There will be an inquest in the morning, probably somewhere around ten o'clock, and you will have to give your evidence in regard to this matter, but I will send you notice of the exact time in ample season."

"All right; we will be on hand," the newspaper man declared.

The chief mounted to the box, by the side of the driver, and away the coach went.

The rest followed after—Kinsade purposely loitering for a minute or so, in order to allow the two gentlemen to get a little ahead of his party, as he wanted a chance to converse freely.

"It did not take you long to get at the chief," the journalist remarked, as the three proceeded on their way.

"I happened to meet him," Van Courtlandt explained. "He had left the hotel, and was on his way to his home, and just as I finished my explanation, a coach came along, which the chief at once engaged, so that no time was lost."

"Ah, yes, I see; and, by-the-way, gentlemen, I do not think it necessary at the inquest to-morrow for us to say anything about the blue diamond," the newspaper man suggested.

"We are summoned to tell what we know about the deaths of the two men. The fact that the Californian had a blue diamond, which the ruffian succeeded in stealing, and which we recovered, has no bearing on the case."

To which the others assented.

"The Californian gave the diamond to me to hold in trust until the original owner should make his appearance, and I am unable to see that this matter comes within the scope of the coroner's inquiry at all," was Van Courtlandt's view.

"It does not; but should the coroner hear of the diamond he might try to interfere in the affair," the newspaper man intimated.

"I do not happen to know the coroner, nor anything about him. He may be a sensible man, who would not trouble his head about the diamond, for, clearly, it isn't any of his business; then again he may be one of these country Dogberrys who would be delighted to make a donkey of himself by poking his nose into a matter which is entirely out of his province."

"I never gave the matter a thought, and so did not say anything to the chief of police in regard of it," the New Yorker explained.

"It is best that you did not, for although the chief is a pretty good sort of a fellow, yet if he knew there was a diamond, worth two or three thousand dollars, mixed up in this murder he might take steps to get hold of the stone with the idea of returning it to its rightful owner," Kinsade observed.

"Well, as far as that goes, I don't think the chief of police, the coroner, or anybody else can get the jewel away from me; the real owner, of course, I except," Van Courtlandt remarked. "There is an old legal saying about possession being nine points of the law, and when a man starts in with any such advantage as that it is pretty hard work to beat him," the New Yorker urged. "I do not pretend to be much of a lawyer, but I have sufficient legal knowledge to be aware that it would almost be an impossibility for any one to get the blue diamond away from me until the rightful owner makes his appearance, and even then whoever sets up a claim must be prepared to back it with strong proofs."

"Oh, yes, you are certainly right about that," Kinsade replied.

"You have the best claim to the jewel, and it will not be any easy matter for any one to get it away from you until you see fit to surrender it."

"And now I suppose you will laugh when I tell you that Clairborne here and myself have come to the conclusion that the wisest thing you could do would be to get rid of this blue diamond as soon as possible," the journalist continued.

A look of surprise appeared on Van Courtlandt's face.

"Get rid of the blue diamond as soon as possible?" he echoed.

"Yes, that is our idea," Kinsade replied.

"Eh, Clairborne?"

"That is certainly the conclusion to which we came," the Creole assured.

"But I do not understand how it is that you came to have an idea of that kind?" Van Courtlandt remarked, evidently very much astonished.

"Now, as I said, I have no doubt you will laugh when I explain the reason," Kinsade observed in his jovial way.

"The fact is both Clairborne and I are inclined to be a little superstitious about this peculiar jewel."

"Superstitious?" Van Courtlandt exclaimed.

"Yes, that is the truth!" the veteran replied.

"But I do not comprehend!" the New Yorker declared.

"We have got the idea into our heads that the blue diamond brings bad luck to who-

ever is unfortunate enough to possess it," Kinsade explained.

Van Courtlandt did not laugh, but he certainly smiled and shook his head in an incredulous way.

"You are not inclined to believe that?" the newspaper man asked.

"Well, gentlemen, candidly, I shall have to admit that I do not. The fact is, you see, the yarn is rather too tough for me to swallow," Van Courtlandt declared.

"Have you considered all the circumstances of the case?" the journalist questioned.

"Just cogitate a bit about the affair," Kinsade continued.

"The Californian had the jewel; he got it from an Englishman who committed suicide because he got tired of facing a run of bad luck."

"Then the Californian, according to his own statement, lost the favors of fortune and things went badly with him."

"In his game with you to-night he played in bad luck right from the beginning, didn't he?"

"Yes, that is the truth. He certainly did not seem to be at all favored by fortune," the New Yorker admitted.

"As a rule he had miserable cards, and when he did manage to catch a good hand I was always fortunate enough to hold a better one," Van Courtlandt explained.

"Then, after getting cleaned out of all his ready cash he started for his hotel, was waylaid, assaulted on the road and mortally hurt; then the ruffian got the blue diamond, and as he was making off with it was shot dead in his tracks, making the third man who had come to an untimely end with this jewel in his possession."

A thoughtful expression came over Van Courtlandt's face as he listened to this recital, and he replied:

"Well, I must admit that I did not see the matter in this light before," he said, slowly. "And I have no hesitation in declaring that it is remarkably strange."

"Clairborne and I talked the matter over, and although neither one of us is a superstitious man yet we came to the conclusion that terrible bad luck had followed the possession of the blue diamond."

"I take no stock in the idea!" Van Courtlandt remarked. "It is a coincidence, that is all. These three men might have come to untimely ends even if they had never seen this blue diamond."

"Very true! they might, but they did not!" Kinsade replied. "Perhaps there isn't anything in the idea, but if I was situated as you are, with a big stake depending upon the result of the race to-morrow, I would get rid of the blue diamond until the race was run."

"Oh, nonsense!" Van Courtlandt cried, lightly. "I wouldn't be weak enough to give way to superstition! I will keep the blue diamond, and what is more, I will wear it on my finger to-morrow as a defiance to bad luck!"

The others shook their heads, and their arrival at the hotel at this time put an end to the conversation.

CHAPTER VII.

THE BLONDE BURLESQUER.

THE morning of the day on which the great race was to take place broke bright and beautiful, and so a weight was taken from the minds of those anxious souls who were afraid that a rain-storm might spoil the pleasures of the day.

The people who frequent the Long Branch hotels are not early risers as a rule, and the fashionable hour for breakfast is about nine.

Again we will ask the reader to go with us to the West End Hotel so that we may direct attention to a gentleman, who, having finished his breakfast, passed to the front veranda and stood by the steps, chewing a quill tooth-pick in an abstracted manner.

He was a man a little below the medium height, inclined to be stout, and who looked to be about forty, but was probably fully ten years older.

His face was rather long, with high cheek-bones, the complexion dark, which gave the man a foreign look, and this was added to by the fact that he wore a bristling mustache with carefully waxed ends, and a long,

straggling imperial, such as the French Emperor, Louis Napoleon, once made so fashionable.

A man not much skilled in reading characters would have been inclined to take the gentleman for a Frenchman, but an expert, after a glance at the prominent fleshy nose, the high cheek-bones, the thick lips and double-chin would have immediately decided that the man was a descendant of the "chosen people," an English Jew, despite his foreign appearance.

The gentleman was elaborately dressed—in fact over-dressed, for although he wore dark clothes, yet he sported an extremely gay necktie, and a great profusion of jewelry, his stubby fat fingers being plentifully adorned with rings, in particular.

The man had an insinuating, oily way with him, and as he glanced around it was with the air of a man who felt extremely well satisfied with himself.

And it was no wonder, for this over-dressed gentleman was one who occupied a prominent position in the world's eye.

The name which he had inscribed upon hotel register was J. Mortimer Fitzmaurice, and any well-posted man—like the veteran journalist, Kinsade, for instance—would quickly have informed a seeker after knowledge that this was the name of one of the most prominent speculators in amusement affairs in the country.

He was an English importation—having come to America with a comic opera company, and had prospered so well that he had taken up his residence here.

He did not manage a theater, but engaged troupes and traveled them about the country, playing them in the different cities, so he was a recognized power in the amusement world.

After the gentleman chewed his tooth-pick for a few minutes he consulted his watch.

"Let me see," he murmured, "it is ten minutes past nine. Her cottage is about ten minutes walk from here so that will bring me there at about twenty minutes past nine."

"I know from my old experience with her that she is not an early riser, but she surely ought to be up by this time."

"Well, if she is not, I can wait until she is, so I will be off."

Then the gentleman descended to the street and proceeded up Ocean avenue.

He went on until he came to a charming little cottage, hidden amid a mass of shrubbery and clinging vines; about as pretty a place as could be found from one end of Ocean avenue to the other.

The occupant of this dainty house was one of the "lions" of Long Branch, and all the hackmen who drive strangers around on sight-seeing expeditions, always make it a rule to halt in front of this charming retreat and vouchsafe the information:

"That is where the burlesque actress lives, Dolly Ragsdale, the Queen of the Blondes."

And this was the truth.

The famous English burlesque actress who had made such a hit when she appeared in New York at the head of a troupe of English girls, under the management of J. Mortimer Fitzmaurice, had taken this vine-clad cottage for the season and with her horses, her dresses and her diamonds had been exciting a great deal of attention.

All the gilded youths—and some men to whom the term "gilded" could be well applied, but who were no longer young—had been "tumbling over themselves," to use the cant phrase, to procure an invitation to visit the beautiful actress in her lonely retreat.

But it was not every man who could procure the pleasure of Miss Dolly Ragsdale's acquaintance, for she was as particular about who she admitted to her presence as any grand dame of fashion could possibly be.

True, she was an actress—a blonde burlesquer as her brothers and sisters of the mimic life irreverently termed her, a woman who displayed her fair proportions on the stage to the admiring gaze of the audience in a very generous manner, and with extremely little clothing.

But on the stage and off were two entirely different things, as she was wont to remark.

To play in the burlesques and wear tights was a matter of business—the generous public paid her extremely well for her labors; but in private life she was a lady, and people must not imagine that she was any common woman because she was on the stage; she was particular in regard to her acquaintances, and every Tom, Dick and Harry was not welcome to visit her cottage.

And it must be admitted that Miss Ragsdale behaved with perfect propriety.

It was true that she was one of the best dressed women at the "Branch," wore magnificent diamonds, had a stunning turn-out, with coachman in livery, putting on as much style as the wife of a millionaire could possibly have done, and when she appeared at the "hops" at the leading hotels no woman in the room was better dressed.

She was always accompanied by her brother, Mr. Thomas Ragsdale, an undersized, typical Englishman of the cockney style, who had a habit of taking a great many liberties with his "haitches," and although there might be a dozen cavaliers dancing attendance upon her during the evening, yet as it was her brother who brought her it was her brother who carried her home.

There was a great deal of gossip in regard to the attentions paid to the dashing actress by Alex Van Courtlandt, and it was very apparent to all that he was a prime favorite with the lady, but the pair conducted themselves in such a way that the tongue of scandal could not find an opportunity for censure.

Then, too, it was earnestly reported and generally believed, that Alex Van Courtlandt was so infatuated with the blonde burlesquer that he was willing to marry her at any time, but the lady was coy, and this was a great mystery to the world at large, for people couldn't understand how it was that a woman who depended upon the stage for her livelihood would not be glad to marry a man of Van Courtlandt's wealth and standing.

When Mr. Fitzmaurice arrived at the cottage he rung the bell and presented his card to the footman—Miss Ragsdale had a full retinue of servants, just like any grand dame with a million at her back—with a request for an interview with the burlesque queen.

In a few moments the footman returned and requested Mr. Fitzmaurice to follow him.

The manager was conducted to a cozy apartment on the second floor, where the actress was taking her breakfast while her brother read the news from one of the morning newspapers to her.

Dolly Ragsdale was really a beautiful woman, of the golden-haired, blue-eyed English type.

She was above the medium height, magnificently formed, with regular features and a lovely clear red-and-white complexion.

"Aha! my dear Fitzzy, is it there ye are?" she exclaimed, putting on an Irish brogue as the manager made his appearance in the doorway.

"Yes, my dear Miss Ragsdale, here I am, large as life and twice as natural!" the manager responded with another elaborate bow.

"Come in and help yourself to a chair!" the actress exclaimed.

"Will you have some breakfast?—can't offer you much, for I always have a light breakfast, never having any appetite in the morning, but if you would like a cup of coffee and some deviled kidneys, with a bit of toast, they are yours to command."

"Thanks, awfully!" Fitzmaurice replied with another bow as he helped himself to a comfortable easy-chair.

"I am ever so much obliged but I will not trespass upon your kindness on this occasion," he continued. "I made a very hearty breakfast at the hotel this morning and so really couldn't eat another morsel."

"You know Tommy, my brother, I believe?" the actress remarked, nodding to her brother who grinned in a good-natured way at the manager.

"Oh yes, I have had the pleasure of meeting Mr. Ragsdale on several occasions," the manager replied with a polite bow in the direction of that individual, who ducked his head and grinned again.

"When did you arrive?" Miss Ragsdale asked.

"Oh, I have been here for about a week." The actress looked surprised.

"Been here for a week?" she repeated. "How is it, then, that you didn't come to see me? Is that the way you treat old friends?" she demanded, evidently a little annoyed.

"My goodness! I thought I was more attractive than this goes to show," she continued, plainly betraying her pique. "The idea! In town a week and never came near me! Why, Fitzzy, how could you?" and she shook her magnificent head at the manager in a deprecating manner.

"My dear Miss Ragsdale, permit me to explain!" the gentleman exclaimed. "I presume you are aware that I rather pride myself on my managerial abilities. In fact, I think I may say, without being egotistical, that I have arranged some very clever things in my line, in my time."

"Oh, yes; Foxy Fitzzy! That is your old nickname across the water, you know!" Miss Ragsdale reminded with a laugh.

The manager grinned as though she had paid him a compliment.

"Ah, yes; I believe some of the knowing fellows in London—dear old Lunnon, don't you know!—were in the habit of affixing a handle like that to my name, and no doubt I deserved the appellation," he remarked with the air of a man who thought he amounted to a good deal.

"Yes, you certainly have managed some 'deals,' as they call them here in America, with really wonderful astuteness," the actress admitted.

"If you remember, I was anxious, this spring, to have you make an arrangement to travel this fall under my management?"

"Yes, I remember," in a languid sort of way.

"And considered that I offered you some extremely flattering inducements."

"Very true; but I didn't care to talk business with you at all."

"I remember all the circumstances perfectly," Fitzmaurice acknowledged. "You said that you were tired of acting, and were not sure that you wouldn't take a rest for a year or so."

"Just so. I had made plenty of money and could afford to lay off for a year or two if the fancy seized upon me so to do."

"Ah, yes; lovely woman, dear delightful creature that she is! will take these capricious notions into her charming little head once in a while!" the manager averred in a theatrical way.

"Oh, come down now!" the actress protested. "I am not one of your fly-away kind!"

"My dear Miss Ragsdale, you never said a truer word in your life!" Mr. Fitzmaurice responded. "For a woman who has made the wonderful success which you undoubtedly have, your head is remarkably level."

"Taffy!" responded the blonde burlesquer, making a grimace at the manager.

Fitzmaurice laid back in his chair and indulged in a hearty laugh.

"Oh, no, it is the truth, and you know it, too, as well as anybody!" he declared.

"I fancy now that you would be decidedly indignant if I should go so far as to even insinuate that you had not been astonishingly successful," he continued.

"Oh, yes, for that would not be the truth," she replied.

"Now then, I am going to take the liberty, as an old friend, to speak very plainly," Fitzmaurice announced.

The actress looked askance at the manager for a moment, and then she smiled in a somewhat scornful way.

"Does that mean that you are going to say something unpleasant?" she asked. "For it is your old friend, generally, who takes upon himself, or herself, the task of telling you disagreeable things which one would be better off for not knowing."

"Oh, no!" cried Mr. Fitzmaurice, throwing up his hands in an extremely Frenchified way as though he was completely surprised that such an idea should enter her head.

"Not at all! I am not that kind of man, don't you know!"

"Because I said that I should speak plainly does not imply that I am going to say anything to wound you in any way."

"Oh, no, I would not be guilty of doing anything of the kind," the manager asserted, in the most positive manner.

"Well, I am glad of that, for I don't mind admitting that I don't like to hear unpleasant things even if they are true," the actress remarked.

"I do not blame you—who does?"

"No one that I know of."

"I suppose there isn't any objection to my speaking freely before Tommy here—he is acquainted with all your business matters?" Fitzmaurice asked, with a glance at the brother, who first grinned, then nodded his head and looked wise.

"Oh, yes, Tommy is posted. I have no secrets from Tommy," Miss Ragsdale replied.

"And you need not be afraid to speak before him either, for you can be sure that he will not blab for he is no talker."

Again the brother grinned and nodded his head.

"Well, then, I will proceed," Fitzmaurice observed, in his bland, oily way.

"In the first place I will say that I understand perfectly well that in business transactions, particularly in a profession like ours, finesse is necessary," he continued.

"As Shakespeare beautifully remarks, we do not wear our hearts upon our sleeves for daws to peck at."

"Yes, that is about the idea."

"This remark is to lead up gently to the declaration that when you told me you did not care to make any arrangements for the fall season because you were tired and wanted to rest, I did not take any stock, as these Americans say, in the statement."

"Oh, come now! it isn't nice, nor polite to inform a lady that she tells fibs!" the blonde-haired actress exclaimed in a joking way, and she shook her finger reprovingly at the manager.

"Oh, it is just as I said, these little harmless white lies are necessary," he replied.

"Neither society nor business could get along without them."

"Well, to return to my mutton, I felt sure of course that you had not given me your true reason, and as I was very anxious to get you under my management I had a curiosity to know what was the matter."

"It could not be the terms, I argued, for I had really offered you more than I had ought to pay."

"Oh, no, the terms were all right; I was satisfied with the share you offered, and there is no doubt that we would both have made a small fortune out of the trip."

"Yes yes, unquestionably!" Fitzmaurice exclaimed.

"Well, as I said, I was curious, and so I thought it would not do any harm for me to look into the matter, all in the way of business, you understand," the manager explained with one of his elaborate bows.

The lady laughed.

"Ah, the people who named you Foxy Fitzzy did not make any mistake!" she exclaimed.

"It did not take me long to discover that one of these gilded New York youths had become infatuated with you, and was reported to be spending his money for your benefit in the most lavish manner."

"I refer to Mr. Alexander Van Courtlandt," he said in conclusion.

"Yes, we are certainly very good friends," the actress replied in an indifferent way, speaking as though she took but little interest in the subject.

"I came to the conclusion then that I understood your game. You intended to marry this gentleman and retire from the stage."

"Well, I haven't married him yet," the Englishwoman exclaimed with a merry laugh.

"Yes, I am aware of that fact, and from what I have learned regarding the matter, I have come to the conclusion that the chances are great you will not marry him."

The actress looked surprised.

"This is the plain speaking to which I referred," Fitzmaurice hastened to say.

"You see, my dear Miss Ragsdale, when I go in to do business, I always proceed in a very systematic manner."

"When it was apparent to me that for some unknown reason you would not play under my management I immediately set about moving heaven and earth, as the say-

ing is, to discover the reason why you would not.

The actress laughed.

"It isn't any wonder that you have been successful!" she declared.

"Of course it did not take me long to discover just how matters stood, and as soon as I comprehended the state of affairs, I did not attempt to persuade you to change your mind, for I was satisfied that you had something in view better than anything I had to offer."

"You are certainly an extremely wise man," the blonde burlesque queen observed in a thoughtful way.

"But now tell me how it is that, having come to such an opinion, you visit me in reference to an engagement?"

"Because I have reason to believe that the situation has changed," the manager replied, promptly.

"Changed?" the actress repeated, a slight frown gathering upon her forehead.

"Yes; and in a few words I will explain. I always made it a point to be on good terms with all these society men who are in the swim, and so, of course, I hear all the gossip of the day."

"I understand."

"About a week ago, in one of the prominent up-town clubs, to which I have the *entree*, your name was mentioned in the course of conversation, and the prospects of a marriage between you and Alex Van Courtlandt was discussed. To my surprise I found that it was the general opinion that Van Courtlandt, although he had inherited two fortunes, was on the brink of ruin."

"Oh, do people talk that way about him?" the actress exclaimed in a disdainful way.

"They most certainly do," the manager replied. "As a rule, the old saying that where there is smoke there must be a fire is correct, and so as soon as I heard this rumor I at once made up my mind that there might be a chance for me to secure you."

"Well, a thought of that kind is not very complimentary to me," the actress remarked with a laugh.

"You assumed that I was willing to marry the man solely on account of his money!"

"Oh, Fitzzy, what a mercenary creature you are trying to make me out to be!" and she shook her finger archly at the manager.

"Ah, my dear girl," I know that you are a sensible woman!" the gentleman replied.

"This love in a cottage is all very well to talk about, you know, but it don't 'go' in real life.

"You are of the stage, stagely, and even though you did marry a man worth a million, I don't believe that you would ever be satisfied to settle down to a quiet, hum-drum home life."

"I think you are right about that," the actress replied, in a thoughtful way.

"I have been on the stage ever since I was a child, in fact have never known any other life, and I will admit that I am beginning to get horribly lonesome. I miss the glare of the footlights, the hum of the assembling audience, the music and the excitement of acting!" the woman declared, her face lighting up, causing her to appear exquisitely beautiful.

"Of course!" the gentleman exclaimed. "It is only natural. I can understand the feeling."

"In that life you are a very queen, with a world of admiring subjects!"

"You are the central figure—you shine a bright, particular star, without any other luminary near to dim your rays, but when you descend from your throne, and retire to private life, you become merely one of a hundred—a thousand, and it is no wonder that you do not feel satisfied."

"Yes, you are right," the actress replied in a thoughtful way.

"Even if I married a man worth a million I know I should regret the stage life."

"Undoubtedly, and there isn't any question but what the theater-going people would regret you," the wily manager declared with a graceful bow.

"Oh, go away with your soft soap!" the blonde burlesquer cried.

"Really now, upon my word, I think you

are the most atrocious flatterer that I ever encountered!"

"You wrong me!" the manager responded. "I only speak the truth, and I would scorn to dissemble, for I have an honest heart," and here the astute speculator clapped his hand on his breast in an affected theatrical way.

The actress burst into a loud laugh.

"Upon my word, Fitzzy, you have a deal of dramatic talent; I wouldn't have believed it!" Miss Ragsdale exclaimed.

"Ah, well, you must remember that I have been dealing with you children of genius for a good twenty years now—have been in close communion with the sons and daughters of talent, so to speak, and therefore it is not wonderful that I should be able to do a little acting when circumstances demand it," the manager replied.

"I think it is more of a natural gift than an acquired one," Miss Ragsdale rejoined.

"And so these clever people have got the impression that as Van Courtlandt is reported to be on the brink of ruin there was not much danger of my marrying him, eh?" the actress asked, abruptly.

"Such is the popular impression."

"And I suppose you think that it is true or else you would not take the trouble to come down and see me—I presume you expect to be able to talk me into going on a tour with you?"

"Yes, I must admit that I came with that idea in my mind."

"But you must understand, my dear Miss Ragsdale, I am not one of the too previous fellows," Fitzmaurice explained. "I always make it a point to be sure of my ground before I go ahead."

"That is where you are wise!" the actress assented. "Oh you certainly deserve the name of Foxy if ever any man did!"

"Ah, you overwhelm me with compliments!" the manager responded with a laugh and an elaborate bow.

"As soon as I heard this gossip I made up my mind to find out just how much truth there was in it," he explained.

"I knew that you had taken a cottage down here for the season; our dear friends, the newspaper fellows, always keep the public at large posted in regard to the whereabouts of the children of genius."

"My first move was to call upon a friend of mine who keeps a private detective office, an importation from across the water, an old Scotland Yard man, who is remarkably clever in his line."

"Well, really now, of all the dodges that I ever heard of this is the queerest!" the actress declared.

"Yes, I am aware that it was rather odd," the wily gentleman admitted with a complacent smile.

"But you must remember that I am a peculiar fellow, so it isn't anything new for me to be up to a dodge of this kind."

"No, I suppose not."

"I wanted information, and I went to work to get it in the best possible way."

"It cost me a good bit of money too, but I am not one of the kind who grudges the 'brass' as long as I get a chance to get my money's worth."

"Oh, yes, I am aware that you are a liberal paymaster when the occasion requires it."

"I told my ex-Scotland Yard friend to put two of his best men on the affair, and hang the expense!" the manager declared with the air of a prince.

"Then I came down myself, and took up my quarters here so as to watch the game," he continued.

"That was a week ago and yesterday I got a full report from my 'shadows.'"

"By the way, do you know just exactly how this Alex Van Courtlandt is situated?" Fitzmaurice asked, abruptly.

"No, I do not, for I never asked the man any questions," the actress replied, slowly.

"I have heard though that he has lost a great deal of money within the last two or three months," she continued.

"A man always has some good-natured friends who are eager to tell of his misfortunes," and the handsome lip of the actress curled in scorn.

"Yes, it is the truth. The man is naturally inclined to be an extravagant dog, and when he found that he needed ready money, some fool friends induced him to try his

luck in the stock market, and the result was that he lost a pot of money."

"Yes, he told me that he had speculated heavily in stocks, and had been unsuccessful, but he is one of those cheerful kind of men who takes his losses so lightly that it is difficult for any one to tell just how hard he has been hit."

"I am aware of that fact," Fitzmaurice remarked.

"He always keeps a stiff upper lip, as these Americans say, but my shadows knew their business, and they got at the facts without any trouble."

"As I remarked, he is an extravagant fellow, and when a whim takes possession of him, spends his money like water."

"Now take this little affair of yours for instance," the manager continued.

"According to the report made by the secret agents, Van Courtlandt has spent eight or ten thousand dollars on you during the last three months."

The actress looked amazed.

"My goodness! these fellows must be remarkably smart to be able to get so near the exact sum."

"I don't believe I could have made a better estimate," she added after a moment's pause.

"Oh, they know their business—a regular pair of sleuth-hounds."

"It did not take them long to discover that Van Courtlandt pays all the expenses of your flat in New York, all your bills down here, provided you with horses and carriages, diamonds and dresses, gave you *carte blanche*, in fact, to run up any bills you pleased, and send them to him for settlement—made an idiot of himself generally in fact; in fine, lavished his money on you without stint, in the hope that you might be induced to consent to become his wife."

"You have described what has occurred correctly, and I marvel at it!" the actress declared.

"As I said before, the men who took charge of the case understood their business."

"Van Courtlandt has promptly paid all your bills, and each week he gives you a check for five hundred dollars to pay the running expenses of your household."

The blonde burlesquer gave a little affected scream of alarm.

"Goodness gracious! these horrid wretches of shadows must have been right in the house here!" she exclaimed.

"I should not be surprised," the speculator replied with a knowing smile.

"It was their business to procure the information, you know, and, of course, they were going to get it by hook or crook!"

"I am really very much impressed by the generous way in which Van Courtlandt has acted," Fitzmaurice declared after a moment's pause.

"And I really regret that he is in such a bad way, although if his ill-luck leads to my securing you for an engagement, it will be a fortunate thing for me."

"Has he really come to the end of his rope?" the actress asked in a thoughtful way and her face was shaded with the lines of care as she spoke.

"He has most certainly, unless his luck turns!" Fitzmaurice declared.

"Like many a man rendered desperate by the rude buffets of ill-fortune he has set all upon a single hazard."

"To-day, the Monmouth Cup race is run—"

"Yes, I know it, and his horse, named after me, Doldale, is the favorite!" Miss Ragsdale interrupted.

"If the horse wins the race he will be in Easy Street for a while, but the one *coup* will not give him back the thousands which he has squandered."

"Suppose he loses?" the actress asked, a dark look upon her handsome face.

"Then he is utterly ruined—worse than ruined, for he will be a good ten thousand dollars worse off than nothing!"

"Oh, I do hope he will win!" the woman cried, abruptly.

"Not because I hope to get any money out of him," she added, "for I do not, but because he is a noble, generous fellow, although fearfully weak in some respects."

"Yes, yes, there is no doubt that he is a fine fellow; his treatment of you plainly

shows that, but, as you justly remark, he certainly is weak," the manager observed.

"Now you are an old acquaintance—you have known me for years, and you are too shrewd a man not to understand just what kind of a woman I am," the actress said, slowly.

"Oh, yes, I think I know you as well as anybody does," Fitzmaurice remarked with a quiet smile of satisfaction.

"So I am not going to pretend to be any better than I really am," the actress declared.

"I am not going to assume a virtue if I have it not," she continued.

"In the case of this young man my vanity was flattered by his attentions, and when he wanted to spend his money on me I was willing to allow him to do so as long as his attentions did not compromise me.

"For a woman in my line of business I have always borne a most excellent reputation," she asserted.

"Yes, yes; no doubt about that!" the manager agreed.

"Any one who knows you understands that the breath of scandal has never yet been able to tarnish your good name."

"Yes, and I am proud of the fact too!" the blonde queen of burlesque asserted, her head up raised, a bright color in her cheeks, and her brilliant blue eyes flashing fire.

"And in regard to taking this man's money, or the money of anybody else who is idiot enough to become infatuated with me, and is so foolish as to believe that a woman like myself, who is talented enough to make hundreds of dollars weekly, can be bought with a few trinkets, or even a few thousand dollars, I consider that such fellows are fair game.

"They have a deal of amusement in dancing attendance on me, and it is only right that they should pay for it."

"Exactly. It is the old story of 'spoiling the Egyptians!'"

"This gentleman 'plunged' pretty deeply on me, to use the cant saying," the burlesque queen observed.

"But as he was reported to be worth a million or so I did not have any scruples in allowing him to spend all the money he wanted," she continued.

"You are not at all to blame. You would have been very foolish if you had rejected his cash," Fitzmaurice declared.

"But I will say to you that I never had any idea of marrying the man, although I must admit that when I saw how lavish he was with his money I was strongly tempted."

"Oh, yes, undoubtedly," the manager exclaimed, with a sagacious nod.

"Few women would have been strong-minded enough to put aside the chance to help a man get rid of a million of dollars," Fitzmaurice continued.

"I will admit that I was rather dazzled by the idea of being able to buy whatever pleased my fancy and have somebody else foot the bills," the actress remarked, with a smile.

"And I thought it would be extremely pleasant to play the grand lady, but now that I have tried it I must confess that it is not all that it is cracked up to be."

"Oh, it is the dullest kind of a life to a woman like yourself, who has been used to the bustle and excitement of the stage," the manager declared, with a shake of the head.

"And then all my neighbors, the dear creatures, turn up their noses at me, because I am an actress!" the blonde burlesquer cried, in supreme contempt.

"Not that I care two pennies about them, but still it is not pleasant!"

"Decidedly not!"

"Possibly if Van Courtlandt's money had held out, I would not have acted this fall; still, though, I hardly think that I could have kept off the stage after the season got fairly under way. The temptation would have been too strong for me to resist."

"Oh, yes, I don't think there is a question about that."

"If Van Courtlandt's horse wins the race, he will be all right for a time?" the actress asked in a thoughtful way.

"Yes, if he wins you could, probably, get six more months out of him, but my shadows report that some of the shrewdest turfmen are inclined to believe that Doldale will be beaten.

"They explain that the public, by plunging on the horse, have made him a favorite, but the old and experienced racing men do not fancy him, and are coming the old turf game of backing the field against the favorite."

"Yes, I see," and then the blonde queen cast her eyes upon the ground and reflected for a few moments.

The manager watched her anxiously, for he saw that she was wavering.

Then she suddenly raised her head, and, looking the wily Englishman full in the eye, said:

"I can't give you an answer until this race is decided.

"If Van Courtlandt's horse wins, he will have a few thousand more to spend upon me, and I might as well have the benefit of the money," and as she spoke a hard, metallic ring was in her voice.

There had been a struggle in the woman's breast between her good and bad angels, and the latter had conquered.

"And if Doldale loses, will you go on a tour with me?" the manager asked. "I will give the same terms that I offered you before."

"Yes, I will."

"You will go with me, then, if these old turfmen know what they are talking about, for they are all betting against the favorite."

"We can tell better after the race is run," the actress replied, dryly.

"By the way, I will drive you over if you like, there will be room on the carriage," she continued.

Fitzmaurice gladly accepted the invitation, and this brought the interview to an end.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE RACE.

As the Monmouth Cup was one of the great races of the year an enormous crowd was attracted to the course.

The "Cup" was the third event on the card, and after the second race was decided, all prepared to witness a great struggle.

There was an even dozen starters, and as the horses pranced up and down the track in their preliminary gallops all eyes were eagerly fixed upon the handsome beasts.

There is an old saying in the racing stables that the birds of the air carry the news, and though the public at large, with that blind stubbornness peculiar to the people, were backing Doldale heavily on the strength of his past performances, yet the old turf veterans were not "playing" on Van Courtlandt's horse.

The Southern Girl, and a Westerner called Lone Oak, also a beast of whom the average Eastern turfsmen knew but little, had crept up in the betting until the bookmakers became alarmed by the persistency with which they were backed, and soon the "pencilers" were not willing to give over 4 to 1 against either horse, for they were afraid that the beasts were far better than was generally supposed.

Miss Ragsdale occupied a prominent position in the grand stand, accompanied by her brother and the theatrical manager.

"I am going to bet on my namesake!" the actress exclaimed, as the horses began to appear on the track preparing for the cup race.

"Fitzy, go put a hundred on Doldale for me, will you, please?" she asked, as she drew two crisp fifty-dollar bills from her purse and handed them to the theatrical manager.

"All right, just as you say," Fitzmaurice remarked, as he rose to depart. "But, if you will take my advice you will put fifty on Southern Girl to win, and fifty on Lone Oak for a 'place.'"

"No, I will not! Doldale is good enough for me!" the burlesque actress exclaimed, petulantly.

"Very well!" and then the manager hastened away.

"By Jove! they have got Southern Girl and Lone Oak both down to three to one now!" Fitzmaurice answered when he returned.

"I was an idiot that I did not get my money on last night, for I could have got ten to one at the hotel."

"Doldale is a beauty and he ought to win," the actress declared, after taking a look at the horses through her glass.

"Handsome is as handsome does is what 'goes' on the race-track," Fitzmaurice replied.

"The old heads are afraid that Doldale can't carry the weight over so long a course; thirty pounds is a lot to give away," he continued, with the air of a prophet.

The starter's carriage made its appearance on the track at this point, and as that worthy, with his red flag, got into it to be conveyed to the starting-point, the owners and trainers of the horses hastened to give their last instructions to the jockeys.

Van Courtlandt, with his trainer, an elderly, gray-bearded veteran, had a brief conversation with the little man perched on the high-mettled racer, who was Hayward, one of the most celebrated jockeys of the day.

"Watch Southern Girl and Lone Oak," the trainer warned. "I don't think any of the others will be apt to be dangerous; but wait on them two; let them make the pace, and then in the stretch come away."

"All right, sir," the jockey replied. "The beast will do the trick, I think, if they don't make the pace too hot; but that infernal Southern Girl is a Lexington—the old four-miler stock, you know—and if she sets out to run from end to end it will be rough on this beast, carrying the weight he does."

"Well, the best thing you can do is to hold back and not force the pace; make a waiting race of it," the trainer advised.

"All right, sir."

And then off went the favorite to join the rest of the horses.

The Southern Girl was the last to start toward the post.

Clairborne, accompanied by Kinsade, was waiting to give the final orders as the colored boy who rode the mare brought her to a standstill in front of the saddling paddock.

"Set the pace from the beginning, Pete," the Creole commanded.

"Don't force the mare, you know, keep her well in hand, but if she is going steadily let her have her head; keep your eyes open, and get off as well to the front as you can; if any of them make the pace hot at first, lay right behind the leaders so as to pump them out as much as possible."

"Yes, sah, I understands," the negro replied with a grin.

"De mar' and dis yere chile are old chums; she's jest de best beast dat dere eber poked her nose through a bridle, and she no more trouble to handle dan a pet muel."

"Look out to keep well to the front and don't get left in the break-away," the Southerner continued. "Keep your eyes too on Lone Oak; he is the dangerous horse."

"There are a couple of the beasts who are inclined to be fractious, and I fancy there will be trouble at the post," Clairborne continued.

"Keep out of their reach if you can, for a kick or two from one of the ugly brutes might disable the mare."

"Yes, sah!" and the negro grinned until he showed every tooth in his head. "Oh, I'll keep my eyes open, drefful wide!"

"Be off with you then, and if you land the mare a winner you will be a thousand dollars richer before you are half an hour older!" the Creole exclaimed.

"By golly, Massa Clairborne, I'll ride all I know how if I wasn't goin' to get a cent!" the colored boy declared.

"I would jest like for to show dese Northern jocks dat we Southern gemmen know how to ride, even if we is a little tanned!"

Both Clairborne and the newspaper man laughed, and the negro rode off to join the other horses, who were prancing and kicking in the neighborhood of the starting post.

"He is an odd genius!" Kinsade exclaimed.

"Yes, he has been with me ever since he was a youngster, and although he has no reputation as a rider, yet, in reality, he is about as good a jockey as I ever saw."

"He is a capital judge of pace, and seems to have an instinctive knowledge of what his horse is capable of doing, so he never makes the mistake of trying to win with a beast who is all pumped out."

"A thousand dollars is a pretty big prize for a jockey to capture for a few minutes' work," the newspaper man remarked with a shake of the head.

"Yes, I am aware of that fact, but under the circumstances I can afford to give

it, for if I win, the race, with my outside bets, will net me over a hundred thousand dollars, so I can well afford to be generous to my jockey," Clairborne explained.

"That is true enough!"

"Then too there are some peculiar circumstances connected with this affair," Clairborne explained.

"Pete is engaged to be married to a pretty colored girl who lives in the village near my plantation, and this thousand dollars will enable him to start housekeeping in splendid style."

"Ah, yes, I see!"

"And you can bet your life the boy will hustle all he knows how to win the race!" the Creole declared.

"Yes, under such circumstances it is very probable."

"By the way, you only cautioned the dark to look out for Lone Oak—ain't you afraid of the favorite?" Kinsade asked.

"No for if the pace is at all hot—and if they attempt to make a waiting race of it, my mare will distance the field—there will not be much left of Doldale after a mile and a quarter," Clairborne replied in a tone which plainly showed how strongly he was convinced that this was the truth.

Just then the cry went up that the horses were off and the pair hastened to secure a commanding position from which to view the race.

It was no start though, for a couple of the horses were behaving as if they were wild, rearing, kicking and plunging so that it was all the riders could do to keep their seats.

"Ugly brutes! they ought to be shot!" Clairborne exclaimed.

The starter had his hands full; ten times he attempted to get them off, and every time he was obliged to call them back.

The keen-eyed Southerner had been watching the proceedings with the eyes of a hawk.

"See how closely Pete is obeying orders!" he exclaimed to his companion. "He is keeping well out of reach of those kicking beasts and when the line starts for the flag he is always well in advance."

"Yes, and do you notice that Lone Oak's jockey is trying the same game?" the newspaper man asked.

"I had my eyes on him, and if it were not for the fact that he has to give the mare ten pounds I would be sorely afraid, for it is my opinion that, both horses being fit, there is not five pounds difference between them."

Again there was a shout, "They're off!" and again it proved to be a false alarm.

"All this monkey-business is bad for the favorite, carrying the heavy weight that he does," the veteran journalist observed. "He will be all tired out before the race begins."

"Yes, that is true, and if some of the jockeys are not careful they will be left at the post, for I can tell by the way that Cauldwell is acting, that he is losing his temper, and it is no wonder, for the way the horses are behaving is enough to provoke a saint! The first thing you know the flag will go down even if some of the fractious horses are not up," Clairborne remarked.

Hardly had the words left his lips when a mighty roar went up from the multitude.

The red flag had fallen and the horses were off.

As the Creole had predicted the three horses who had made all the trouble were left at the post.

Pete had kept his eyes open, as he had declared he would do, and so secured an excellent start, being the second horse off, while Lone Oak and Doldale were a good length behind, then came the rest, all in a bunch.

"By George! that fellow in black and yellow has got a good start!" the journalist observed.

And he glanced at his card in order to see what horse it was.

But the Southerner, being well posted in regard to the horses, gave the information:

"It is King Thomas, the imported ten-thousand-dollar horse who has never even been placed in any race in which he has started, and yet he is a tolerably speedy brute for a mile, but he has always had the

ill luck to meet better horses than himself when the distance suited him."

"He is not dangerous then?"

"Oh, no, yet for half a mile he has a wonderful turn of speed; when he covers the three-quarters though you will begin to see him come back to the rest," the Creole replied.

"Just the horse then to act as a pace-maker!" the journalist declared.

"Yes, and he is making it hot, too, better than 1:40—possibly as good as 1:35!"

The Southerner had his field-glasses to his eyes now, and was eagerly watching the progress of the race.

The journalist was also using his glasses, and so the pair were able to keep close watch on the movement of the steeds.

"The mare is keeping right after King Thomas—he is not gaining an inch!" Kinsade declared as the leading horse passed the first-quarter post.

"Yes, but the pace is too hot," Clairborne observed. "The horses will never stand it. You can see that they are beginning to string out already."

"Yes, and Doldale is improving his position every jump, almost."

"Oh, he is a good miler! there is no discount on that!" the Southerner asserted.

"And I would be willing to bet two to one that when the mile is over he will be up to the leaders, but the pace will 'break his heart,' and when his jockey calls on him for a final effort in the stretch he will not be able to respond."

"Lone Oak is forging to the front, too," Kinsade remarked.

"Yes; his jockey does not dare to lay back too far for fear that the horse may not be able to come up when he is called upon."

As the Creole had predicted, after the first mile King Thomas's bolt was shot, as the turfmen say, and he began to "come back."

Doldale and Lone Oak, coming on with a rush, caught King Thomas and the Southern Girl.

At a mile and a half the race seemed to lay between Doldale, Lone Oak and the Southern Girl.

Doldale had got his nose in front, Lone Oak was at his saddle, while Southern Girl, on the outside, just at the favorite's flank, was coming strong.

"By Jove! it is a splendid race!" the journalist exclaimed, enthusiastically.

"Yes; and Doldale is carrying his weight better than I expected, but in a few seconds the mare will challenge him."

"See how artfully Pete is riding. He is on the outside, and I don't believe that either Doldale's or Lone Oak's jockeys have any idea of how strong she is coming."

"Pete has not called on the mare yet; wait till the last quarter, and then if he doesn't treat the others to a surprise party I don't know either the boy or the horse as well as I think I do!"

The three were in the stretch, a dozen lengths ahead of the rest.

The cry went up: "Doldale wins!"

But the favorite's astute jockey felt that the horse was beginning to flag, and so he laid on the whip.

Lone Oak's rider was watching every motion, so his whip descended, too, on his beast's flank, and at the same time Pete put the spurs into the mare.

All three horses responded nobly.

A dozen strides and Lone Oak passed Doldale.

The favorite was beaten, and then, with a mighty rush, Southern Girl came on, passed Lone Oak, and beat him to the wire by a length—a most beautiful finish!

CHAPTER IX.

AFTER THE STRUGGLE

A MIGHTY yell went up from the throats of the multitude, for the race had been about as exciting a one as Monmouth Park had ever seen.

"Clairborne, old fellow! let me congratulate you!" the veteran journalist exclaimed, grasping the Creole by the hand.

"Your mare has won a most magnificent race, and you are a hundred thousand dollars in pocket."

The Southerner laughed and cordially shook hands with the newspaper man.

"Thank you! I appreciate your congratulations, I assure you!" Clairborne declared.

"I am not a poor man by any means, for I have been lucky enough to make a deal of money in the last ten years, still, no matter how rich a man is, a hundred thousand dollars comes in very handy."

"A racing stable costs some money to run, and though I race for the pleasure of the thing, yet it is agreeable to enjoy that pleasure and yet make money out of it at the same time."

"Oh, yes, no doubt about that!" Kinsade observed.

"And I must say that I am deuced glad that you won, apart from my desire to see you carry off the prize, because owing to the hints you gave me about what the chances were I put three hundred ducats on your mare at ten to one, which was the best odds I could get, so I can safely say that I am three thousand dollars better off for having met you, which I assure you, my dear Clairborne, is quite a windfall."

"I am very glad, indeed, that you were lucky enough to land so good a stake," the Creole replied.

"You see I had confidence in your judgment; I thought you knew what you were talking about, and so I resolved to venture a few dollars, although, as a rule, I am rather shy about betting on so uncertain a thing as a horse-race."

"I am no horseman," the journalist explained, "so I don't dare to risk my money on my own judgment, and when a man tries to get a tip on a thing of this kind the chances are great that he will be put into a hole."

"Oh, yes, that is true, and then it is a very unsafe thing to play a horse on its public form, for horses are peculiar creatures, and a beast that can do a mile in better than 1.40 to-day is liable to go amiss and be ten seconds slower on the morrow."

"Oh, yes, of all uncertain things in the world a horse-race is about the most uncertain."

During the conversation the pair had been walking toward the saddling paddock, and they arrived there just as the horses came up.

The Southern Girl appeared to be in excellent condition, and it was plain that the race had not punished her much. Lone Oak, too, looked well, but the favorite plainly showed how severe had been the struggle.

Alex Van Courtlandt was there, and no one could possibly have guessed from his looks that he had been terribly hard hit by the outcome of the race.

"I did the best I could," the veteran jockey remarked to the young man as he dismounted from the horse.

"But the distance was too long and the weight too heavy," he continued.

"The pace was a mighty hard one, too," he added. "And when I called upon the beast for a final effort in the stretch, he was all out, and couldn't come."

"You rode a magnificent race, Hayward, and no living man could have done any better," Van Courtlandt responded with a smile.

"But the mare is one of the Lexington four-milers, and even with equal weights I doubt if Doldale could have beaten her at the Cup distance," he added.

The young man spoke calmly, and without the slightest trace of feeling, and the best judge of character would never have guessed that the result of the race had beggared him.

In the grand stand the burlesque actress had watched the struggle at the finish with bated breath, her face was white and her eyes blazing.

When the shout went up "Doldale wins!" she sprang to her feet in her excitement, giving utterance to a cry of joy, and then when the mare came on with her mighty rush and the favorite fell back into the third place, she sunk back into her seat, biting her full red lip with her pearly white teeth until the blood came.

Never in all her life had the blonde queen of burlesque been so fearfully excited.

"What did I tell you?" the wily Fitzmaurice exclaimed as the horses passed under the wire, and the mighty roar which went up from the multitude proclaimed that the race was over.

"Didn't I warn you not to put your money on Doldale?" the theatrical man continued.

"If you had taken my advice you would

be three hundred ahead now instead of being a hundred out of pocket."

"Oh, yes, you are awfully clever!" the burlesque actress cried in a rage. "You knew, of course, just how it would turn out," she continued, in a sarcastic way.

"And it is a wonder, if you were so certain, that you didn't put a thousand or two on the nasty mare, and then you could boast of having gained something worth winning."

The woman was extremely angry as was plainly evident both from her words and manner.

The wily theatrical speculator saw at once that she was in such a fit of temper as to be ready to take offense at almost anything.

"Ah, yes, my dear Miss Ragsdale, I did not dare to risk much, for these horse-races are such deuced uncertain things that a man is never safe in risking much money on them, even though he may think he is well posted," Fitzmaurice observed in his smoothest way.

"Oh, yes, they are horridly uncertain!" the actress exclaimed.

"Why, it was only yesterday that Van Courtlandt told me that he felt certain that his horse would win," she continued.

"Yes, yes! I had a talk with him last night at the hotel—you see, since coming down here I have made a point to cultivate his acquaintance on your account," and the speculator grinned as though he imagined he had said something smart.

"Oh, you are extremely clever!" the actress exclaimed in a spiteful way.

"And I could plainly see that he was extremely confident that his horse couldn't lose the race," the speculator continued in his oily style, without taking any notice of the outburst of the angry woman.

"It was a sure thing, and like a good many other supposed-to-be sure things in this uncertain world it did not turn out as it ought to have done."

"It is a beastly shame!" Miss Ragsdale exclaimed, angrily. "The horse ought to have won and it would have won too if the jockey had been good for anything!" she continued.

"Why didn't he use his whip before, and not wait until the last moment? But I don't believe the man had any eyes, or else he would have seen how dangerously near to him the other horses were!"

"As it was he let them creep right up behind, then they rushed right by him, and the race was too nearly over for him to force his horse to increase his speed by the use of the whip."

"Well, it may be that you are right," the manager replied in a diplomatic way.

"Possibly the jockey did wait too long before he used the whip," he continued. "But it was my impression though that the horse was tired, and was not able to respond when he felt the punishment."

"He could have done a great deal better if the jockey had been more clever!" the blonde burlesquer declared with all a woman's willfulness.

"Well, I suppose this finishes Van Courtlandt," Tommy Ragsdale remarked with a grin.

The actress turned on him in a fury, and her great eyes fairly blazed.

"You curl!" she cried in low but bitter accents. "Do you dare to gloat over the ruin of the man upon whose money you have lived for the last six months?"

The other grew as white as a sheet and he fairly seemed to grow smaller as he shrunk away from the indignant woman.

"I wasn't a-doing any gloating business," he replied, sulkily.

"What do you want to go and fly at a fellow like a tiger-cat in this 'ere sort of way?"

"I didn't mean no harm, and I should think a cove might speak once in a while without having his head snapped right off."

"Oh, you cannot deceive me, and you are only wasting your time in trying to do anything of the kind!" she retorted, still speaking in a low tone, for although the majority of the people in the neighborhood of the party had deserted their seats after the Cup race was over, yet there were some within ear-shot if she had spoken in an ordinary tone of voice.

"I ain't a-trying to play no game on you," Tommy replied in an humble tone, acting

for all the world like a whipped cur who, forced into a corner, feared he was about to receive more punishment.

"Oh, yes, you are!" the blonde burlesque retorted, in suppressed rage.

"Do you think I don't know you? Do you imagine that I have lugged you around with me for a good ten years now without being able to read all your thoughts in your face just as I would read an open book, you mean, miserable apology for a man!"

Tommy cowered under the fierce denunciation.

"Oh, come now, let up on a coon," he whined. "I didn't mean no harm!"

"No, no, no harm!" she repeated, in bitter scorn. "You are only glad because Van Courtlandt is ruined, and you would like to openly gloat over the matter if you only dared."

"Do you suppose I hav'n't seen ever since I made Van Courtlandt's acquaintance that you did not like him?"

"He is a gentleman and you, you low miserable brute, you are not worthy to tie his shoes."

"Why, for two pins I would throw you overboard, and marry this man, ruined as he is!" the burlesque actress continued, in a state of great excitement.

The circumstances of the case added fuel to her flame, for she could not raise her voice and give loud utterance to the anger which she felt burned within her veins.

The actress was only a common, low-bred girl, although as she rose in the world she had done her best to play the lady, and under such conditions as now existed it would have been an immense relief to her mind if she could have given free vent to her temper.

If she could have denounced the cringing man at the top of her voice, called him all sorts of names, and abused him to her heart's content she would quickly have been satisfied, but this was denied her and she chafed in anger against the restraint.

"You could easily afford to do it," the wily manager suggested, in his soft-soaping way.

"My goodness! a woman like yourself who can easily make from five hundred to a thousand dollars a week can afford to marry any kind of a man, and with your opportunities to make money it does not really make a bit of difference to you whether your husband has a cent or not."

"Oh, yes, I know that. I am independent!" the actress exclaimed, proudly.

"I will tell you what I will do," Fitzmaurice said, eagerly, judging that there was a chance that he might persuade the actress to engage with him.

"If you will sign with me for forty weeks I will guarantee you twenty-five thousand dollars clear money, for the trip, and pay all your expenses, and if the business on the whole tour goes above a certain point I will whack up a good per-cent, in addition."

By this time the rage of the actress had abated in a measure.

This liberal proposition aroused the commercial instincts of her nature, and her face assumed a reflective look.

"Well, you have certainly made me a liberal offer," she said in a meditative way.

"Yes, that is the truth, but I can afford to do it, and you will be worth the money to me!" Fitzmaurice asserted.

"It is a large sum to guarantee in a lump, and I will put the cash up in any bank which you may be pleased to designate before we start on the tour, with the understanding that you are to be at liberty to draw so much per cent. of the gross sum each and every week."

"A man can't make a fairer proposition than that!" he added.

"Oh, no, the terms are liberal enough," the actress replied, thoughtfully.

"And just consider, my dear Dolly, what a truly magnificent chance it gives you to play the grand lady with this ruined gentleman!" the wily speculator urged.

"A chance to play a really heroic part," the manager continued in a theatrical way.

"Now that he has met with this terrible reverse he will undoubtedly come to you for consolation, for that is a man's nature."

"When he is distressed he seeks the woman whom he loves, for her sympathy is as balm to his wounded soul!"

"Why, Foxy, I had no idea that you could do the pathetic after this fashion!" the actress exclaimed with a dry and cynical laugh.

"Oh, I am a very talented man!" the manager exclaimed in a burlesque way.

"The trouble is, my dear Miss Ragsdale, the world at large has not yet discovered just how talented I am, but I live in hopes!"

And then the manager grinned, as he always did when he thought he had said anything clever.

"You make too much money by acting off the stage to ever go on it," the woman observed.

"Very true, and it is not probable that I will ever tempt fortune in that line," Fitzmaurice remarked.

"But, to return to my mutton: Van Courtlandt comes to you for sympathy, and then after condoling with him upon his misfortune, you throw in your little dramatic effect."

"You say, 'Alexander, when you were rich and sought my hand, I was coy and would not agree to marry you, but now that you are ruined, take me! I am yours!' Tableau and quick curtain!"

CHAPTER X.

A NEW IDEA.

A THOUGHTFUL look came over the features of the actress and she bent her eyes to the ground, apparently in thought.

The brother watched her for a few moments with a look of deep disgust upon his face.

Then he said in a very humble, servile way:

"I am all ready to get out, of course, for if you get married it will put my nose out of joint, but that isn't neither here nor there."

"I wouldn't stand in your way for a minute. If you think you will be happy with this man I am sure I am agreeable, and you needn't stop to think about me in the matter at all."

"I will do you the justice to say that you have always done the fair thing by me, and I am not a bit afraid but what you will do the same in the future," he continued, in that peculiarly servile manner which some of the lower-class English adopt.

A manner which is particularly disagreeable to a well-bred man for it suggests the idea that nothing could possibly give the speaker greater pleasure than to get down and allow himself to be walked upon.

"Shut up, Tommy, and don't say anything more!" the burlesque actress cried, sharply.

"Because you happen to be born a donkey there is no need of your braying to let every one become acquainted with the fact."

Tommy sunk back in his seat, with a sort of "crushed again" expression on his countenance.

"This is a very nice little programme that you have laid out for me," the actress continued, turning to Fitzmaurice. "But I don't think I will carry it out though."

"I was a fool to lose my temper a moment ago!" she declared.

"It is not very often that I make such a gay and glittering donkey of myself, but I suppose every one is liable to make a 'bad break' of that kind, as these Americans say, once in a while."

"Oh, yes!" Fitzmaurice exclaimed. "The man or woman who never makes a mistake is more than mortal!"

"Very true," the woman replied. "The fact of the matter is I got all worked up over the race, and my excitement had to find vent some way, so that accounts for the idiotic display which I made of my temper."

"Well, we are all liable to little accidents of the kind," the manager remarked in a soothing way.

"It is not often that I make such a donkey of myself, but, as I said, I was all worked up, so excited in fact that I hardly knew whether I was standing on my heels or on my head!" she declared.

"Not a particularly pleasant position, eh?" the wily speculator observed with a smile.

"I should say not!" the actress exclaimed with a grimace.

"But it is all over now, and it will be a long while, I promise you before you will see me give another exhibition of the kind."

"The best of us will make a slip sometimes," Fitzmaurice declared.

"Now, this little sentimental role which you suggested I could play, is altogether foreign to my nature, and I know very well that I could not make a success out of it," the actress remarked in a dry way.

"One great drawback against my doing anything of the kind is the fact that I don't love the man."

"I am of a peculiar nature, anyway, and I don't believe there is much love in my composition."

"Van Courtlandt is a gentleman, and very much in love with me, as is plainly evidenced by the large amount of money which he has thrown away on my humble self."

"He is very agreeable—a nice fellow—in fine, a perfect gentleman in every respect, but I have not fallen in love with him, and I don't believe that I ever could love him, no matter how hard I tried."

"Now, while it is not a difficult matter for a woman of my temperament and disposition to force herself to make believe that she loves a man who is wealthy enough to give her everything that her heart can desire, it is an altogether different matter when the fellow is poor, and she has to find the money."

"Oh, yes!" Fitzmaurice exclaimed. "There is a vast difference between the situations!"

"I know very well that though I respect the man, and esteem him as a friend, and, probably, if I had married him, would have got along with him all right as his wife, yet, under these changed conditions, I know very well I never would be satisfied to marry him."

"You are quite right!" the wily manager exclaimed. "As these Americans say, your head is level! and I am very glad to find that you are disposed to take a sensible view of the matter."

"I really—to give you my honest opinion—think it would be perfectly absurd for you to marry this ruined man, who hasn't a cent to bless himself with."

"In fact, if I were in your place, I should hesitate to marry any man, rich or poor," the manager continued.

"You are your own mistress now, and able to make as much money as any woman ought to care to spend, so you are perfectly independent."

"Yes, that is true enough."

"Van Courtlandt's sun has set, and he disappears, but soon another man will come to take his place," the manager remarked.

"Ah, by the way, speaking of that, an idea has just come to me!" Fitzmaurice exclaimed.

"I was talking with the owner of the mare which won the Cup; he is a Creole from Louisiana, and enormously wealthy. It was yesterday on the hotel veranda. You drove by, he was struck by your beauty, and when I explained that I was an old friend of yours, and could give him an introduction he seemed to be much pleased."

"Now suppose I bring him to your house?"

"Very well—is he good-looking?"

"Oh, yes, dark eyes and hair, a Southerner, you know."

"Perhaps he will be fool enough to want to take Van Courtlandt's place and enjoy the pleasure of paying my bills for the benefit of my society!" the actress exclaimed with a cynical laugh.

"Is he married, by the way?" she continued.

"No, he is a bachelor."

"Well, I am glad of that for I draw the line at married men," Miss Ragsdale declared.

"I don't mind the young, unmarried men; if they are foolish enough to spend their wealth upon me it is all right," she continued. "It is worth something to be permitted to be enrolled in the ranks of my friends, and then I always live in hope too that some day some gentleman, with a good fat bank account, will come along that I may be able to fall in love with, and then I can get married." As she uttered these words

she cast a malicious glance at Tommy, who immediately became extremely gloomy.

"Tommy wouldn't mind it—would you, Tommy?" she asked, with a wicked smile.

"You can do as you like for all of me," he replied in a sulky way.

"I can't stop you! You always have your own way, and I would not try to stop you, what is more, if I could!"

"This is a fine, dashing fellow, and they say he is worth a mint of money," the theatrical manager explained.

"He is altogether a different sort of man from Van Courtlandt, but seems to be a jolly good fellow though."

"I suppose he has won a small fortune by the victory of his horse," the actress remarked in a reflective way.

"Oh, yes, they were talking about the matter at the hotel last night, and I happened to get in with a lot of sporting men—fellows who were in the ring, you comprehend, who understand all that is going on, and they said that if the Southern mare won the cup, her owner, this Clairborne—that is his name—Jefferson Clairborne—would be pretty certain to win from a hundred to a hundred and twenty-five thousand dollars."

"My goodness!" cried the burlesque actress in utter surprise. "Haven't you made some mistake about the matter? It does not seem possible that the man could win any such sum as that on a single race!"

"Oh, no, these men knew what they were talking about. It is what these sporting fellows call a 'hog-killing.' That is, no one knew anything about the mare, and so the bookmakers gave big odds, twenty and thirty to one, in the beginning, so if a man risked a thousand dollars he could win thirty thousand."

"Ah, yes, I see."

"They all agreed that if Clairborne's horse did win the bookmakers would suffer fearfully."

"Dear Fitzzy, run and catch onto the man as soon as you can!" the actress exclaimed with her most bewitching smile.

"It isn't right for a man to go around with so much money as that without having one of the softer sex to help him spend it."

"Who knows? perhaps I may fall in love with this fellow, and if I do I might make up my mind to marry him," and again the blonde queen shot a malicious glance at the downcast Tommy.

"Oh, you needn't think you can worry me by talking like that!" the brother exclaimed.

"You can marry a dozen of them for all I care!" he continued. "I am not afraid but what you will look after me, all right, and so the more money you get the better it will be for me."

"Tommy looks at the matter with the eyes of a philosopher!" Fitzmaurice exclaimed with a laugh.

"Well, Tommy is not so bad a fellow when you come to know him," the actress remarked.

"There are the horses coming up for the next race," the manager observed.

"Clairborne will probably be on the quarter stretch, and I can get an opportunity to speak to him."

"Do! that is a dear fellow!" the blonde beauty exclaimed. "I have spoiled one of the Egyptians, and as his wealth has vanished into thin air, so there isn't a hope of getting any more out of him, I am eager to get hold of another."

"I'm getting to be a terrible mercenary creature, eh?" she continued with a light laugh.

"Oh, well, this is a peculiar world, and the human in it who does not take particular care to look out for Number One will have a hard time of it," Fitzmaurice replied.

"I am not half so bad as some people try to make me out!" the burlesque actress declared.

"In the first place, I am extremely careful of my reputation, and all who come to see me must behave themselves or else they are not welcome to my house."

"Then in the second, I never ask a man to spend any money on me."

"If any young fellow, with more money than brains, is foolish enough to imagine he can buy a woman's love by squandering his money on her, I always allow him to go ahead."

"My argument is this: a man of that kind

is bound to throw away his money in some ridiculous way, and I might just as well have the things which the money will buy."

"You are correct!" Fitzmaurice responded with a knowing shake of the head.

"But I will be off to see Clairborne," the manager continued. "And you can rely upon my doing all I can to bring the Southerner to your feet."

And then a sudden thought came to Fitzmaurice.

"Hold on!" he exclaimed.

"I don't know that I can really afford to do this for you," he continued.

The actress looked astonished.

"Why not?" she asked, while Tommy looked at the speculator with questioning eyes.

"Well, the idea has just come to me that it is possible it is not for my interest to aid you to make a conquest of this rich Southerner," the manager explained.

"I am anxious to have you go out under my management," he continued.

"Now look how this sort of thing has worked in the past—and the past is a guide to the future, you know. As soon as you allowed this Van Courtlandt to squander his money on you, it was good by to acting, and if you succeed in getting this Clairborne under the spell, the chances are that you will not want to go out this coming season, and that will most materially interfere with my plans."

The blonde burlesquer laughed merrily.

"Ah, there is no mistake about your being justly entitled to the name of Foxy Fitzmaurice!" she declared, shaking her finger archly at the theatrical man, who grinned as though he considered he was highly complimented.

"But you can go ahead and arrange the introduction all right," she continued.

"As I told you before, this playing the fine lady is not at all what it is cracked up to be, and I am so far satisfied with the trial I have that I do not want to do it again."

"I want to get back to the stage, and I will not be contented until I do."

"You ought to accept my offer," the wily Fitzmaurice urged.

"You cannot do any better with any one else," he argued.

"You know that my reputation as a manager stands A No. 1, and I think I may truly say, without being open to the imputation of flattering myself, that there isn't a man in the country who can bring you before the public in better style."

"Oh, yes, I am aware of that fact, and I think from what I know of your way of doing business that I would rather go with you than with any other manager."

"Will you accept my offer then?" the speculator asked, in his oily insinuating way.

"Yes, I will accept!" the blonde beauty replied immediately.

"I might as well settle the matter now as at any other time, and then it will be off my mind."

"I have a blank contract in my pocket, as it happens," the manager explained. "And as I am provided with a fountain pen I can easily fill it out, so we can settle the matter for good and all right away."

The blonde actress burst into a hearty laugh, while Tommy rubbed his hands softly together and chuckled as though he was much pleased by the outlook.

"Well, Fitzzy, there is no denying that you are a prince of coaxers, and the king of schemers!" Miss Ragsdale declared.

The manager grinned, and pulled the ends of his long mustache with a self-satisfied air.

"A man must be up with the times in order to do anything nowadays," he replied.

"But in regard to this affair, as long as you have made up your mind to go back to the stage you had better go with me than with any one else, for owing to the facilities I possess I will be able to make more money out of you than an ordinary manager, so can afford to pay you better, and my idea about a transaction of this kind is that after the parties make up their minds the quicker the details are down in black and white, so as to settle the affair, the better."

"Prepare your contracts and I will sign them!" the blonde actress exclaimed, with sudden decision.

"You are quite right in wanting the matter settled," she continued. "And you can be sure that if I once sign you can depend upon me to keep my agreement, for I have always prided myself upon being a slave to my word."

"Thanks, awfully!" the theatrical speculator replied, as he hastened to get out his contracts and his pen.

"I am not at all alarmed about your keeping your contracts if you once sign with me," Fitzmaurice remarked. "For I know what your reputation is in that line."

"Yes, if I sign you can depend upon my going with you, and even if I should take a fancy to this wealthy Southerner—if I should make up my mind that it would be a good thing for him to spend some of his wealth on me, I should not allow the matter to interfere with my engagement," Miss Ragsdale declared.

"If he desires to enjoy the pleasure of my society he will have to travel around the country in my train," she continued with the air of a queen conscious of her power.

"Certainly—certainly, of course, that is the ticket!" Fitzmaurice declared, busily engaged in preparing the contracts.

"And this suits you, Tommy, eh?" the actress asked, turning to that worthy with a scornful smile upon her lips.

"Oh, yes!" the brother replied. "I have got all I want of these swells and their airs!" he declared. "The actors are good enough for me, and I like beer a deal better than I do champagne at any time."

"Tommy is decidedly plebeian in his tastes," the actress observed.

"He doesn't like wine because it goes to his head, and a few glasses knock him off his pins completely."

"Too rich for his blood!" Fitzmaurice declared, still industriously working away.

It only took him a few minutes to complete the work.

"Here you are!" he exclaimed as he came to the end.

Miss Ragsdale read the contracts carefully, then took the pen and affixed her signature.

"There are my pothooks for you," she remarked. "And now I am your slave for forty weeks."

"My queen you mean," the manager replied. "My brilliant diamond, and you can rely upon my giving you surroundings worthy of your luster."

"Now I will go for the Southerner and you can amuse yourself with him until the season opens."

CHAPTER XI.

THE INVITATION.

FITZMAURICE departed, feeling highly pleased with the result of his work.

"I have got her all safe and sound," he muttered as he made his way from the grand stand to the quarter stretch, where the great guns of the turf were in the habit of congregating.

"And I had considerable doubt too whether I would be able to do anything with her," he continued.

"For I got the idea in my head from the way she acted with this Van Courtlandt that she had really fallen enough in love with him to have serious thoughts of marrying the man, but the result of the race settled the question."

"The divine Miss Ragsdale is an eager worshiper at the shrine of the god, Mammon."

"She loves money, and though she might be inclined by her heart to give a favorable answer to a wooer who could safely boast that he was worth a million or two, yet the very moment the riches took flight, avarice put love to rout, and she came to the conclusion that she did not think enough of the man to share her own money with him."

And then the wily manager chuckled as he reflected upon the way in which he had secured the realization of his wishes.

"Oh, yes, I am entitled to the name of Foxy Fitzmaurice fast enough!" he exclaimed.

"And though I am not a man inclined to boasting, yet I do not hesitate to say that the party who gets much the best of me, be they man or woman, will have to get up remarkably early in the morning!"

Again the wily speculator chuckled, and rubbed his hands briskly together, thereby indicating how satisfied he felt with his work.

"Ragsdale would have been the biggest kind of a fool if she had not accepted my offer!" he declared as he approached the place where the magnates of the turf congregated. "For I am giving her a small fortune, and I ought to be able to pull out ten or fifteen thousand for myself too."

"I am giving her big terms, but these children of genius come high; they know their value, and if there is any money to be made through their talents they are bound to have the lion's share."

As he finished the sentence, Fitzmaurice caught sight of the Southerner in conversation with the veteran newspaper man, Kinsade, and Van Courtlandt.

An idea came into his head and he hesitated for a moment to reflect upon it.

"There is an old saying about its being well to be off with the old love before getting on with the new," the manager muttered.

"Now, in this instance, can't I kill two birds with one stone? Can't I by inviting Clairborne in Van Courtlandt's presence convey to him the idea that the divine Miss Dolly has taken a fancy to the Southerner and thus gently insinuate to him that his nose is out of joint?"

"I don't think there will be any difficulty in arranging the matter in that way if I throw in a little tally about my pointing Clairborne out to her as the owner of the beautiful horse which won the great race, and explain what an interest she immediately took in him."

"The chances are great that Van Courtlandt, smarting over his defeat, will be in a condition to become angry upon very little provocation, and it seems to me the chances are great he will jump immediately to the conclusion that the blonde beauty, with the fickleness peculiar to her charming sex, has taken it into her elegant head to fall in love with the Southerner."

"Under ordinary circumstances he wouldn't be apt to attach any importance to the matter, but as things are now I think the odds are big that he will."

"One advantage I have, and that is he does not know me, although I know all about him, and he will not be apt to suspect that I was trying to play a little game upon him."

Again the wily speculator chuckled at his own astuteness, and then made his way through the crowd to where the three were standing.

With Kinsade the theatrical manager was well acquainted, for in his business tours Fitzmaurice had met all the prominent journalists in the country, and he made it a rule to take particular pains to cultivate the acquaintance of the newspaper men.

"How do you do, gentlemen? Fine race, wasn't it?" the manager exclaimed as he came up to the group.

"Allow me to thank you, Mr. Clairborne, for the little hint you gave me last night in regard to your mare," he continued.

"I improved the 'tip,' and as a result I am a few thousand dollars ahead of the game."

The wily Fitzmaurice was one of the men who believed in telling a good story, and so whenever he spoke of his gains, he always magnified hundreds into thousands.

"I am glad that you were so fortunate," Clairborne replied.

"My only regret is that I did not venture ten times as much!" Fitzmaurice declared, shaking his head with a regretful air.

"But this turf business, though, is a little out of my line, and so I did not dare to go in very heavily."

"If it had been a theatrical speculation now, I would have known just how to handle the matter, and speaking of theatrical speculations, that reminds me that I have a bit of news in that line, Mr. Kinsade, which may interest you."

"I will be glad to hear it, for I am always on the lookout for an item," the journalist replied.

"Of course you know Miss Dolly Ragsdale, the great burlesque actress?" Fitzmaurice observed.

"Oh, yes!" Kinsade replied.

"Well, I have just had the good fortune

to induce her to sign a contract to star under my management for forty weeks, and I don't mind telling you, Kinsade, that I am giving her a certainty of more money for the engagement than any star in her line ever got in America, or any other country, for that matter!" the wily manager declared, assuming a confidential air.

"That is an important item, and, of course, you want me to keep the matter a profound secret," the old journalist remarked in a joking way.

"You would be very angry if I spread the news far and wide through the columns of the newspapers?"

"Oh, yes, of course," the speculator replied with a wink.

"Now then, old fellow, I depend upon you to give me the best kind of a send-off," he continued.

"You know how to work the oracle to the queen's taste, and there is no use of anybody attempting to tell you how to do it, but if I might venture to make a suggestion I would say that if you were to hint in your article that Miss Ragsdale is going to receive about fifty thousand dollars in gold for the engagement, clear of all expenses, I would not be very much put out about the matter."

"All right! I will dress the account up in fine style," Kinsade replied.

"I will be ever so much obliged to you if you will."

"I will give you a glowing article!" the veteran journalist declared. "The importance of the subject demands it, for Miss Ragsdale is a head and shoulders above any woman in her line who ever appeared in this country."

"Yes, yes, no doubt about that!" Fitzmaurice assented. "And she is just as nice and sweet in private life as she is brilliant and captivating on the stage! In fact, I am quite certain that I never met a woman more attractive both on and off the stage than she is."

"That is true," Kinsade asserted.

"By the way, Mr. Clairborne, she was very much interested in your mare's victory," the theatrical speculator remarked, turning to the Southerner. "And when I pointed you out to her as the owner of the victorious animal she immediately said, with that peculiar frankness which is one of her greatest charms, that she would be delighted to have the pleasure of making your acquaintance."

"I would be much pleased indeed to meet the lady," Clairborne observed with a polite bow.

"I will be delighted to introduce you at any time," Fitzmaurice remarked.

"If you are at liberty this evening I will take you to her cottage," he continued. "She has a charming place here on Ocean avenue, a very bower of roses," the speculator declared with that touch of poetry which rendered his advertisements so attractive to the general public.

"I have an engagement to-night," the Southerner replied. "But you can rest assured I will take an early opportunity to enjoy the honor of making Miss Ragsdale's acquaintance."

At this point the conversation was interrupted by the cry that the horses were off, indicating that the next race had commenced, and all three immediately hurried to procure favorable positions for witnessing the result of the contest.

As soon as the race ended Fitzmaurice made his way back to the grand stand, chuckling over the neat way in which he had arranged the matter.

But when he related the particulars to the blonde actress she was annoyed.

"I don't like it at all!" she exclaimed. "It looks just as if I was deserting the loser for the winner, and I don't care two straws for either."

CHAPTER XII.

MORE BAD LUCK.

THE shrewd scheme of the theatrical manager worked exactly as he anticipated.

Van Courtlandt was in just the condition to fancy that all the world was turning against him.

The defeat of his horse galled him to the quick.

The attempt to win the race was the last desperate throw of the despairing gambler.

He had failed, and now must face the consequences.

Being deeply in love with the burlesque actress his first thought after the race was run, and Doldale beaten, was of the bright and brilliant woman.

The oft-quoted saying of the French gamblers came into his mind, "lucky in love, unlucky in play."

Would this prove to be the case in the present instance? In the heart of the unfortunate young man was a vague hope that it might be true.

But the invitation that the theatrical manager delivered from the beautiful blonde actress to the Southerner cast a chill upon him.

He had not told Miss Ragsdale just how badly he was situated, but as he gave her credit for being an extremely shrewd woman, he guessed that she conjectured that he was near the brink of ruin, if Doldale failed to win the Monmouth Cup. She knew that he felt certain that his horse would succeed, and had bet heavily upon the result with the idea of retrieving his fortunes by one great coup.

He had played and lost.

Was he now about to be a loser also in the game of love?

"I will know for certain to-night!" the young New Yorker exclaimed.

"She has always evaded giving me a direct answer," he continued.

"But now the time has come when it must be either yes or no. I will ascertain my fate before I sleep this night."

Van Courtlandt was not fazed for his decision, but on this occasion he was so wrought up by the spell of ill-luck which had lately come upon him that it seemed to materially change his character.

He kept to his resolve, and that evening, a little after eight o'clock, he made his appearance at the cozy cottage of the actress.

It was a beautiful night; the moon was at its full and rose early.

Miss Ragsdale sat in a rocking-chair, on the veranda of her cottage, watching the play of the shimmering moonbeams on the ever moving waves of old Ocean.

She was alone, and was not feeling particularly cheerful, for she expected a visit from Van Courtlandt, and was apprehensive that the interview might prove an unpleasant one.

Although, as she said with perfect frankness, she did not believe she possessed such a thing as a heart, yet she did have a conscience, not a very active one possibly, but it still troubled her a little in a case of this kind, for she knew that she had not acted rightly in this matter.

She knew that she ought not to have allowed Van Courtlandt to squander his money upon her, when she felt that it was not at all likely she would ever be willing to marry him.

"I was an idiot to allow the man to throw away his money on me!" she exclaimed, as she saw the tall form of the young New Yorker at the gate.

"The only excuse that I can offer for myself is that I liked the young fellow, and took a deal of pleasure in his company, but then I knew well enough, right at the beginning, that I would never marry him, and it was decidedly dishonest for me to accept his money, particularly when I had plenty my own and didn't need it.

"I am a mercenary wretch!" she exclaimed, in a bitter tone.

"A regular miser!" she continued. "That is what I am, and I ought to be ashamed of myself.

"I will get my punishment now though, I suppose, for I presume that I am in for an extremely bad quarter of an hour!"

Van Courtlandt had perceived the lady and came directly to her.

"Enjoying the view of the moonlight on the water?" he asked, as he stepped upon the veranda.

"Yes, it is beautiful, isn't it?" the actress replied, in her sweetest tones.

"Help yourself to a chair!" she continued. "I am glad you have come to-night, for I am feeling quite lonely and out of sorts."

She was trying to play the hypocrite, but, somehow, she lacked her wonted skill.

There was no warmth in the tones and she

had an idea that her voice sounded hollow and unnatural.

Van Courtlandt took a chair and seated himself by the side of the actress.

The stroke of adversity which had fallen upon him had sharpened the young man's senses, and therefore he did not fail to notice that the beautiful actress was embarrassed by his presence.

Bitter indeed were his thoughts.

"She does not want to see me, and my presence here is unwelcome!" he murmured, to himself, as he followed Miss Ragsdale's example and gazed out for a moment at the beautiful sight of the moonbeams playing on the waters.

Both of them felt that the position was an awkward one.

The blonde burlesque determined to bring the interview to a close as soon as she could do so without appearing to be unpolite.

"I told you that I felt lonely and out of sorts, and I suppose it is because I have been away from the stage so long," she remarked, abruptly.

"The stage is my life, you know! I have been used to it ever since I was a child, and I am quite sure that I will never be contented to remain off of it for any length of time.

"I have signed an engagement, by the way, to act this fall, and in another month I will be at work, so I will have to cut short my stay here; at the end of the week I will depart."

"So soon?" exclaimed Van Courtlandt in surprise.

"Yes, I have a lot of things to do in order to get ready for the tour and a month really does not give me time enough."

The young man felt that this was a death-blow to his hopes.

With a great effort, though he concealed his disappointment, and affecting an air of surprise, he said:

"Why, I thought you had about made up your mind to retire from the stage?"

"Oh, yes, I really did have a serious notion of doing something of the kind," the actress replied in a careless way.

"You have changed your mind then?" Van Courtlandt asked.

"Yes, I have indeed. The brief experience which I have had of a private life satisfies me that I was never intended to shine in the domestic circle.

"The garish lights, and the tinsel of the stage suit me far better than a quiet, humdrum domestic life," she continued.

"I have done my best to make believe I would be contented to settle down," she added. "And that is due to your persuasive tongue.

"I you remember, I told you right at the beginning that I did not believe I would ever be satisfied to give up the stage."

"Yes, I recall the circumstance," the young New Yorker observed, slowly.

"I allowed you to persuade me to try the experiment, but it has turned out just as I expected," the burlesque actress explained, a trifle of embarrassment perceptible in her manner.

"And, if you recollect, I said I would be able to give a decided answer to the proposal which you were kind enough to make me after I had tried the experiment of playing the good dame in private life for a while."

"Yes, I recall the circumstance," Van Courtlandt remarked in a very grave way.

"Well, I am going to be frank and honest with you," Miss Ragsdale declared. "I don't believe in beating about the bush in a matter of this kind, and I trust you will give me credit for being sincere. I haven't tried to lead you on, have I?"

"Oh, no," the young man replied, immediately. "It is not your fault if you are attractive and captivating."

"I don't doubt that I am something of a coquette, but then it comes natural to all women to want to please the men, so I ought not to be blamed for that."

"Oh, no!"

"And I don't mind admitting to you that I like you as well as any gentleman whom I ever encountered, but I feel perfectly satisfied that I should never be contented to give up the stage and settle down as the wife of any man, and I shall have to decline your

offer of marriage, but we can still be good friends all the same."

"Yes, that is true," Van Courtlandt replied, with a polite inclination of the head.

Having expected the blow he was in a measure prepared for it.

"All I regret is that I allowed you to spend so much money on me," the actress exclaimed, seized with a sudden spasm of virtue.

"But you must remember that it was your own idea and I was reluctant to allow you to try the scheme."

"Oh that is all right!" the New Yorker declared, carelessly. "It gave me pleasure to entertain you."

"Well, if you are satisfied I suppose I ought to be."

"I am contented."

"It was such a pity that your beautiful horse did not win the race!" the actress exclaimed abruptly.

"I never was so disappointed about anything in my life!" she continued.

"Horse-racing is one of the most uncertain things in the world," Van Courtlandt observed. "And the best judges are apt to make mistakes."

"And is it true that you are very hard hit by the result of the race?" she asked, with an expression of great concern on her features.

"There! I don't suppose I ought to be so inquisitive, but I am a woman, you know, and curiosity is one of my sex's failings."

Van Courtlandt laughed, but there was very little merriment in the sound though.

"Well, I must admit that I have been hit pretty heavily, for as I had the utmost confidence that the horse would win the race I backed him rather more heavily than I ought to have done; men will make mistakes of that kind you know."

"I was in hopes that the report wasn't true."

"There isn't any use of my attempting to disguise the truth," the young man observed with a tinge of bitterness in his tone.

"The men who are in the ring know that I lost very heavily."

"If you need ready money I can let you have some!" the actress blurted out, her heart getting the better of the cool calculation which usually ruled her actions.

Van Courtlandt flushed a little.

"Thank you! I am much obliged for the offer, but I think I will manage to pull through all right."

Then he happened to glance at the clock.

"So late! I must be going!" he exclaimed, "so will say adieu for the present."

They shook hands and the New Yorker departed.

CHAPTER XIII.

A DESPERATE RESOLUTION.

VAN COURTLANDT'S head was in a whirl as he strode down the avenue toward his hotel.

"I expected the blow," he murmured, "but it is none the less painful for all that."

"My idol, beautiful and bewitching as she certainly is, a very paragon of woman-kind, is only common clay after all."

"I do not think there is much doubt that if Doldale had won the race, and so replenished my empty money-chest, this beautiful woman would have been inclined to give a favorable answer to my suit."

"To a woman of her kind there is a deal of difference between the man rich enough to give her all the luxuries that she craves, and the fellow who is wealthy only in affection."

"Doldale's failure to win the cup surely cost me the love of the woman I fancied."

"Love!" and Van Courtlandt gave vent to a bitter laugh. "Oh, no! I ought not to call the fickle fancy which she had for me love, for good, true love does not depend upon money or condition."

"It did not take long for the report to get abroad that I am a ruined man, and it is the truth too."

"I am really worse than ruined, for I owe debts of honor which I am not able to discharge."

"Fool! weak, miserable fool that I was to plunge so deeply!" he continued with bitter accent.

"I staked all upon a single cast! Fortune

was against me, I have lost, and now must pay the hazard of the die.

"Well, it is but a short step from this world into the other; that is one consolation, and it will not take me long to make it.

"I have wasted my love on a fickle-minded woman, who immediately grew cold as soon as the blasts of adversity began to blow keen and chilly upon me.

"It is the only time that I have ventured to try my fortune in the game of love, and now that I have lost the quicker I am out of the world the better."

The thoughts of the young man were bitter in the extreme, as will be discovered from these muttered reflections.

When he arrived at the hotel he went directly to his room, turned on the electric light by means of which the apartment was illuminated, then opened his trunk and took out a revolver.

"It was a handsome, nickel plated weapon and Van Courtlandt smiled grimly as he placed the pistol upon the table, then seated himself in a comfortable easy-chair.

"There is the little instrument which will insure me a quick dispatch to the other world," he murmured.

"One little touch of the finger and the leaden messenger of death will speedily put an end to all my cares and troubles."

Then as he rested his hand upon his knee the brilliant sparkle of the blue diamond caught his eyes.

He gazed upon the wondrous jewel admiringly for a moment, and moved his hand so as to watch the rays of light which came from the shining stone.

"It is really a most beautiful thing—as handsome a diamond as I ever saw, and it is such an odd, peculiar stone, too, that I do not wonder at the superstition which has become attached to it; but, as the Westerners say, I take no stock in the legend, although there isn't any doubt that I have good reason to do so, for assuredly I have had terrible bad luck ever since the jewel came into my possession; but I am not weak minded enough to believe that the diamond had anything to do with it.

"It is simply a coincidence, that is all; a coincidence and nothing more.

"Now then to arrange for the last act of my life-drama—for the tragedy which will be the wind-up."

And the young man gave utterance to a harsh and cynical laugh.

"It is customary in such cases, I believe, for the man who is about to take the desperate leap into the dark, to leave a letter behind, recounting his reasons for rushing, unbid, into the other world.

"But to my thinking, though, it is a custom more honored in the breach than in the observance, and so I shall not put pen to paper.

"All I could say under the circumstances would be that I had played the game of life so badly that it was advisable for me to stop as soon as possible.

"No, no! no last words!

"Let the world say what it pleases, I care not. After I have crossed the dark river to the Great Beyond, the idle chatter of this world will not trouble me."

Then there was a knock, followed by the immediate opening of the door, and the Creole, Clairborne, followed by the veteran journalist, Brewster Kinsade, made his appearance.

Van Courtlandt made a motion as if to seize the revolver for the purpose of concealing it, but before his fingers closed upon the weapon, he changed his mind, and with a cynical smile withdrew his hand, sinking back into the chair.

"Excuse our unceremonious entrance," the Southerner exclaimed in his polished, polite way. "We were anxious to see you, and did not stand upon forms."

"That is a pretty little popgun," the journalist observed, pointing to the nickel-plated revolver.

"By the aid of that a man could soon shuffle off this mortal coil," he continued. "I hope that you haven't any idea of providing the world with a sensation of that kind?"

The remark was uttered in a joking way, but there was a look in the keen eyes of the veteran newspaper man which plainly showed that he looked upon the matter in a serious light.

Van Courtlandt was a straight-forward, honest fellow, who hated deception in every form, and so even under the present circumstances, he shrunk from evasion.

"Well, when a man is in trouble, a revolver bullet will surely show him a speedy way out," the New Yorker replied.

"Pardon me, a stranger, for presuming to inquire in regard to your personal matters, but is this current report true that you have lost so heavily by the defeat of Doldale that you will not be able to meet your obligations?" Clairborne asked, earnestly.

"Believe me, my dear fellow, my friend here does not ask this question out of mere curiosity," Kinsade hastened to say, perceiving that Van Courtlandt hesitated to reply.

"Oh, I don't mind admitting the truth, for to-morrow the world will know all about it," the New Yorker replied in a reckless way.

"Yes, it is the truth. I am a ruined man, and, worst of all, I have plunged so deeply, and so foolishly, that I have incurred debts which it will be impossible for me to pay, and, unluckily, they are debts of honor, so if I cannot pay them I must not expect to hold up my head in the society of gentlemen any more," and the face of the young man was gloomy in the extreme as he spoke.

"My dear fellow, you are really in a most unfortunate situation, and I have no doubt that my little joke about the revolver proving to be a friend to you in your present situation came pretty near the truth!" Kinsade exclaimed.

"Yes, that is a fact, and I will not attempt to deny it," Van Courtlandt answered.

"Ah, my boy, you ought not to, have given way to any thought of that kind!" the veteran declared.

"While there is life there is hope, and the darkest cloud is sure to have a silver lining," Kinsade continued.

"But there—we did not come here to worry you with wise sayings, for there is mighty little consolation in empty words; we mean business, and Mr. Clairborne here is prepared to come right to the point if you will permit him to speak."

Van Courtlandt was taken completely by surprise by the unexpected announcement, as the expression upon his face plainly showed.

"Gentlemen, I am amazed," he remarked. "But I will gladly listen to aught that you may have to say, and pardon me for my discourtesy in not asking you to be seated—pray help yourself to chairs."

"Oh, that is all right!" the journalist replied. "When men bounce into a fellow's room as we did it is only natural for the occupant to be so taken by surprise as to forget a little thing of that kind."

Then the pair sat down.

"I trust, Mr. Van Courtlandt, that you will pardon me, a stranger, for taking an interest in your affairs," the Southerner remarked, in his earnest way. "All I can plead in excuse is that in this life of trouble all men ought to be brothers to one another, and if a man is in trouble it is only right that he should be assisted."

"That is really a beautiful doctrine, eh, Van Courtlandt? and just think how much better this world would be if all mankind lived up to it," Kinsade remarked.

"Oh, yes, there isn't any doubt about that," the New Yorker admitted.

"To come directly to the point, I heard this evening that you had been extremely hard hit by the failure of your horse to carry off the Monmouth Cup, and it was openly said that you would never be able to meet your obligations. Mr. Kinsade and I were together when the disclosure was made, so I immediately expressed to him my wish to be of service to you in this extremity, and asked his advice about the matter, for as I am almost a perfect stranger to you I was at a loss how to broach the subject."

"And I told him to come right to you and go into the affair without hesitation," Kinsade remarked.

"In a case of this kind I do not see any sense in beating about the bush," he continued.

"Mr. Clairborne, fortunately for him, is a heavy winner by this meeting, his gains by the cup race alone being over a hundred

thousand dollars, so he has the ready cash, and can spare a few thousands, just as well as not."

"Understand, Mr. Van Courtlandt, I do not need the money—really have no use for it," Clairborne explained. "And if a loan, to be repaid when it is convenient for you, will be of any service I shall be happy to oblige you."

"Really, gentlemen, I am so taken by surprise by this kind offer that I do not know what to say," the New Yorker responded, greatly embarrassed.

"Take it in the same spirit, old fellow, in which it is offered!" Kinsade exclaimed.

"Mr. Clairborne can spare the money just as well as not."

"Yes, that is the truth, and I assure you it will give me great pleasure to be able to be of service to you!" the Southerner declared in a tone which plainly showed that he meant every word he said.

"Gentlemen, I will frankly admit to you that this offer has saved me from rushing in a very untimely manner into another world, and I will accept it, although perhaps the largeness of the sum required to meet my obligations may astonish you," Van Courtlandt remarked.

"I do not think that it will astonish me at all," the journalist remarked, with a good-natured smile.

"I know that you have 'got it in the neck,' as the sports say, and then, too, you have been indulging in an expensive luxury during the last six months," Kinsade continued with a sly wink.

"These things are open secrets, you know, and bound to leak out."

"You refer to Miss Ragsdale, I presume?" Van Courtlandt said with a clouded brow.

"Yes, to that gifted and beautiful creature, who has been so richly endowed by nature with the charms so attractive to the male sex.

"I have squandered a few thousands on her, and, gentlemen, I don't mind making the honest confession to you that I was fool enough to believe she was the kind of woman who could appreciate a man's devotion," Van Courtlandt remarked in a gloomy way.

"No, no, my dear fellow, she isn't built that way!" the veteran journalist declared.

"There is a good deal of the harpy about her, although I firmly believe that her character is above reproach."

"Well, the dream is over as far as I am concerned," Van Courtlandt remarked, grimly.

"I will not deny that I feel a little sore about the matter," the New Yorker continued.

"But I have no doubt I have had an escape, for it is better to lose the woman before marriage than afterward."

"Oh, yes, that goes without saying," the old newspaper man declared. "And you are wise to take this sensible view of it. Women like this dashing burlesque actress rarely make good wives."

Then the eyes of Kinsade happened to fall upon the blue diamond.

"Ah, you have the sparkler still, I see," he observed. "Now if you were inclined to be superstitious you might ascribe some of your bad luck to the baleful influence of that jewel."

Van Courtlandt regarded the blue diamond in a thoughtful way for a moment.

"Well, I certainly have had an astonishingly bad run of luck recently, but I am not prepared to go to the length of holding this peculiar-looking jewel responsible for it," he replied.

"There is more in this world than is dreamed of in your philosophy, Horatio," Kinsade quoted. "And to my thinking there isn't any use of men declaring that luck hasn't anything to do with the rise and fall of fortunes, for I have seen too many instances to the contrary to allow me to believe that such an assertion is true, and I don't think that if I were you I could certainly get rid of the blue diamond as soon as possible."

"Well, as far as that goes I have no wish to retain the jewel," the New Yorker replied.

"My tastes never ran in that direction, and really for a man hovering on the brink of

ruin it is not quite the thing to sport such a costly jewel as this."

"You might sell it," the journalist suggested. "Still under the circumstances I do not suppose that you feel as if you had a right to dispose of it."

"No, for I am only holding it in trust for the rightful owner; when he or she, as the case may be, appears I will give up the property."

"I believe I will have to confess that I am superstitious," the Southerner remarked with a smile. "I come from the land of the Voodoo, and although hard-headed, practical men laugh at the idea, yet I have seen some strange circumstances in connection with this mysterious African transplant which cannot be readily explained."

"Will you permit me to make a suggestion in regard to this matter," the Creole continued.

"Certainly! I shall be pleased to hear it," Van Courtlandt responded.

"As far as I can judge this English actress is, as Kinsade suggested, of the harpy tribe," Clairborne remarked.

"While you had plenty of money she smiled upon you, but when adversity knocked at your door there came a decided change in her behavior."

"Yes, that is certainly the truth," the young New Yorker admitted with a clouded brow.

"She is a woman, and, of course, a man doesn't wish to make war on one of the weaker sex even though she has treated him badly, but the idea occurred to me that you might turn over the blue diamond to her," Clairborne suggested.

The others looked a little surprised.

"You can explain to her, you know, that you are only holding it in trust for the rightful owner, and as you are not fond of jewelry you would prefer to get rid of it," the Creole continued.

"Our friend is going on the idea that this jewel is fated to bring bad luck to whoever possesses it, and as the divine Miss Ragsdale has not treated you well it would be a neat way for you to avenge yourself," Kinsade remarked.

"Well, although I am not superstitious enough to believe that the blue diamond can exert such a baleful influence upon its possessor yet I have no objection to turning the jewel over to Miss Ragsdale for I most assuredly do not care to wear it," Van Courtlandt observed in a thoughtful way.

"Give it to her then!" the veteran journalist exclaimed. "It will be a fine opportunity to test the power of the stone for good or evil."

"Miss Ragsdale bears the reputation of being an extremely lucky woman," Kinsade continued. "And most certainly she must have been born with a golden spoon in her mouth judging from her career in this country, and if after she comes in possession of the blue diamond her luck should change it would be odd in the extreme."

"Ah, yes, but I am not superstitious enough to believe that the jewel will have any thing to do with changing the current of her luck," Van Courtlandt remarked with a disapproving shake of the head.

"A man or woman's good luck cannot last forever," the young New Yorker continued. "A change for the worse is sure to come sooner or later."

"Well, there will be no harm in trying the experiment," the Creole urged.

"Oh, no, and I have no objection, but as I took my leave of the lady this evening I do not desire to see her again," Van Courtlandt explained in a rather awkward way.

"That matter can be easily arranged," Kinsade remarked. "I have a slight acquaintance with Miss Ragsdale and if you will intrust the jewel to me I will convey it to her."

"Ah, yes, the affair can be arranged in that way," the New Yorker observed.

"Certainly, there will be no trouble about it," Clairborne declared.

"One bargain though I must make with you gentlemen!" the old journalist exclaimed, abruptly. "And that is, you must accompany me on this mission as a bodyguard for I have no idea of allowing this malignant jewel to bring me into danger."

Kinsade delivered the speech seriously

enough but there was a twinkle in his eyes which belied his words.

"Oh, yes, we will go with you!" the Creole exclaimed.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE FAKIR.

ALL three laughed heartily and then the journalist suggested that as the night was not far advanced, and Miss Ragsdale belonged to the late hour tribe, it would be a good idea to carry the ring to her at once, and then the affair would be settled.

The others thought that this was a good idea and the three set out.

"You need not escort me clear to the door of the burlesque queen's home," Kinsade observed as they came within sight of Miss Ragsdale's cottage.

"Although I have the greatest respect for the malignant power of the blue diamond yet I think I can manage to protect myself from its evil influence for the few minutes which will intervene between my leaving you and delivering the jewel to Miss Ragsdale," he continued.

"We will be within hailing distance," Van Courtlandt remarked with a smile.

"And if the evil genius of the blue diamond succeeds in encompassing you with foes, all you will have to do is to give an alarm and we will hasten to your aid."

The New Yorker spoke as soberly as though he fancied there was really danger that the journalist would be assaulted.

Then the three laughed.

"This is far enough, gentlemen, you can wait here until I return," Kinsade said.

The two halted while the journalist went on.

Miss Ragsdale was seated on the veranda, just as the young New Yorker had left her, but her brother, Tommy, and the theatrical speculator, Fitzmaurice, now bore her company.

The actress received the old newspaper man in the most gracious manner.

By nature she was disposed to be agreeable, and then it was policy too for her to gain the good will of the men who by reason of their command of the public press could do so much to make or mar the fortunes of one who depended upon the stage for a living, therefore whenever she came in contact with one of the "formers of public opinion," she took particular care to appear at her best.

Fitzmaurice too had a high opinion of the importance of newspaper men, and so Kinsade was received with all the honors.

He came at once to the subject of his mission and when he displayed the blue diamond Miss Ragsdale was delighted with the appearance of the jewel.

"Really it is too awfully good of Mr. Van Courtlandt to allow me to wear this beautiful stone!" the actress exclaimed.

"You can tell him that I appreciate the compliment highly."

"And in case the owner does not appear I presume Miss Ragsdale can retain the ring," the theatrical speculator remarked, always with an eye to the main chance.

"Oh, yes, I suppose so, for I judge from what Mr. Van Courtlandt said that he does not care for jewelry," Kinsade replied.

"But here is another point that must be taken into consideration," the actress remarked, her woman's shrewdness suggesting an idea to her.

"This jewel is very valuable—worth four or five thousand dollars, I suppose, eh, Mr. Fitzmaurice?"

"Oh, yes, I should say it was fully worth four thousand," the speculator replied with the air of a man who thought he knew what he was talking about.

"Suppose I lose the jewel—or it is stolen from me?" Miss Ragsdale asked.

"Well, in that case Mr. Van Courtlandt would undoubtedly hold you blameless," the journalist replied.

"You merely hold the jewel in trust for the rightful owner, but until he appears it is just the same as though you owned the property," Kinsade explained.

"And the owner may never appear," Fitzmaurice suggested.

"In that case then you retain the diamond and, as I said, it is just the same as if you owned it," the newspaper man replied.

"It is very good indeed of Mr. Van Courtlandt to give me the privilege of wearing this beautiful jewel; I am very much obliged to him, and I hope you will not neglect to convey to him my thanks," the burlesque actress remarked in her sweetest tones.

"Oh, you can be sure that I will not forget," Kinsade replied, and then he took his departure.

The theatrical speculator watched the departure of the veteran journalist until he was lost in the gloom of the night, and then he turned to Miss Ragsdale, and with a sagacious shake of the head, said:

"Do you know that I don't like the looks of this sort of thing?"

"No, don't you?" and a look of surprise appeared on the face of the actress.

"Indeed I do not, and it is my opinion that there is something wrong about the matter," the wily speculator replied.

"What makes you think so?" Miss Ragsdale asked, apparently considerably impressed by the words of the other.

"There is an old classical quotation, 'Beware of the Greeks bearing gifts,' or words to that effect, my classical knowledge is a little rusty, you know, and I am not certain that I have the quotation exactly correct, but the sense is there all right."

"The warning to beware of the Greeks bearing gifts, means, I suppose, that any one ought to be on their guard against accepting favors from people whom one has no reason to suppose to be friends," the actress remarked thoughtfully.

"That is it! that is the idea, exactly!" the manager exclaimed.

"From what you told me of your parting interview with this Van Courtlandt this evening it seems to me that he has no reason to look upon you with favorable eyes," Fitzmaurice argued.

"Yes, I undoubtedly threw him overboard," the actress admitted. "There isn't any mistake about that, although I tried to smooth the matter over as nicely as possible, by saying I had made up my mind that I could not live off the stage."

"Ah, yes, but Van Courtlandt is no fool, you know, and he understands that if this great reverse of fortune had not overtaken him the chances are great that you would have been content to allow matters to go on as they were, and, under such circumstances he would be more than mortal if he did not harbor some resentment against you."

"Oh, yes, I could see by his face that he was not pleased, of course," the actress admitted.

"And yet under these circumstances he virtually makes you a present of a diamond worth four or five thousand dollars!" the speculator exclaimed, with a weighty shake of the head.

"It certainly does seem strange, yet, for the life of me, I cannot see that there is any thing evil about the matter," Miss Ragsdale declared.

"Well, I will have to admit that on the surface, apparently, there isn't any, but I must say that I do not like the looks of the affair notwithstanding."

"Isn't he making what these Americans call a 'bluff,' you know?" Miss Ragsdale asked, with a shrewd smile.

"A bluff, eh?" Fitzmaurice observed, thoughtfully.

"Yes, he knows that everything is at an end between us, and although he is a ruined man yet he wants to carry matters with a high hand, just as if he still had plenty of money and so sends me this magnificent diamond? Come now! doesn't this seem to be a very probable explanation of the matter?"

Fitzmaurice reflected over the question for a few moments and then he shook his head.

"I am afraid the conundrum is too difficult for me to guess, and I shall have to give it up," he remarked.

"Oh, by the way, to change the subject, I ran across an odd genius to-night at the hotel who had come to see me in regard to putting him before the public, and he referred me to you as being acquainted with what he could do. He is a Hindoo juggler and calls himself Ali Nana, the Fakir of Ava."

"Yes, I remember meeting such a man a dozen years ago in England when I was barn-storming in the provinces, but though

I believe I did see the man's performance, yet I can't recollect anything about him, whether he was good, bad, or indifferent."

"Well, like the majority of the people who make their living in a public way, he has an extremely good opinion of himself, and did not seem to have a doubt about your remembering him, and he evidently relied upon you to give him a first-class recommendation."

"Well, I cannot."

"I told him that I was going to pay you a call to-night, and he said he would like to see you in my presence for then you would be able to tell me what he could do," the speculator explained.

"It may be possible that after I see the man I will be able to remember something about him, but I do not feel at all sure of it," the burlesque actress remarked.

"There he is now!" Fitzmaurice exclaimed as a tall figure came out of the gloom of the night and advanced to the gate of the cottage.

As he came up the walk, with the rays of the moon shining full upon him, the three upon the veranda were able to see just what he was like.

As the manager had observed he was a Hindoo.

He was tall in stature, a man of fifty or thereabouts, with a massive face and the air of a judge.

Although clad in a well-worn dark suit, the only foreign thing about his costume being a red fez, yet he presented such a strange appearance that he would undoubtedly have attracted attention anywhere.

He made a low bow in the oriental fashion as he gained the veranda.

"It is many years since I had the pleasure of gazing upon your beautiful face, Miss Ragsdale, but you have changed so little that I would know you, no matter where I might meet you," the Hindoo said in a deep, musical voice, speaking English quite plainly and with only a slight foreign accent.

"Ah, yes, I do remember you now, although I just told Mr. Fitzmaurice that I did not believe I would be able to recollect anything about you," the actress remarked with a charming smile.

Her vanity was flattered by the compliment which the stranger had bestowed upon her.

The blonde burlesquer was no longer in the heyday of youth, and she had all the actress's horror of growing old.

The "passing" of her personal charms meant the loss of power, position and the ability to make money.

"Tommy, bring Mr. Nana a chair!" Miss Ragsdale continued.

"Sit down and make yourself comfortable," she added.

"Yes, my dear Fitzy, I do remember this gentleman and I can truly say that he used to give an excellent performance."

As the Hindoo seated himself his eyes fell upon the blue diamond, sparkling in the moonlight like a miniature ball of fire.

CHAPTER XV.

THE HINDOO'S STORY.

THE East Indian started in surprise, while the others surveyed him with wonder.

"What a strange jewel you have there!" he exclaimed.

"This blue diamond?" Miss Ragsdale asked.

"Yes, it is a very peculiar stone," the Fakir observed, shaking his head in a solemn way.

"That is true," the actress assented. "I never saw a diamond like it before."

"Neither did I," Fitzmaurice remarked. "Although I have seen a great many diamonds in my time and consider myself to be an expert in that sort of thing."

"In my own country, Hindostan, I once saw a jewel which bore a great resemblance to this gem. It was many, many years ago, but on account of the peculiar circumstances connected with the stone all the particulars of the affair have remained in my memory," the Hindoo observed in a very grave way.

"Oh, is there a story about the blue diamond to which you refer?" the actress asked.

"Yes, and it is a very strange story in deed," the Fakir replied.

"Tell us the tale!" Fitzmaurice exclaimed, in the peculiar theatrical way which he so often adopted.

"Yes, yes, go on!" Miss Ragsdale added. "I am very fond of stories."

The East Indian shook his head.

"I don't really know as I ought to speak," he replied in a hesitating way.

"Why not?" the theatrical speculator inquired. "What is the objection?"

"If the lady prizes the jewel, and is at all superstitious, she may not wish to wear the stone after she hears my story," the Hindoo answered in a solemn way.

"Gammon!" Fitzmaurice cried. "Now you are coming the old dodge of pretending that you ought not to tell the story so as to make us the more eager to hear it."

"Ah, yes, all you Eastern people are up to tricks of that kind!" Miss Ragsdale declared.

"But you need not be afraid of alarming me, although I shall have to admit that I am horribly superstitious," the actress continued. "Still, I don't believe that any story which you may be able to tell will frighten me so that I will not want to wear this beautiful gem." And as she spoke the blonde burlesquer looked with admiring eyes upon the diamond, sparkling in the moonlight.

"Come on, old chap! give us the story!" the manager exclaimed.

"Yes, without regard to the consequences!" Miss Ragsdale added. "We will hold you blameless, even if you do frighten us half to death."

The Hindoo smiled in the peculiar sad way common to his race, and then said:

"You shall have the tale, and perhaps it will not make any impression upon you, for you children of the Northern races are not such slaves to superstition as are those who dwell in the land of the Orient."

"That is undoubtedly the truth, so proceed with the narrative," Fitzmaurice remarked.

"As you are probably aware, it is the custom in my land to set up in our religious temples images of the gods whom my people worship," the Hindoo began.

"Oh, yes, I have seen them myself," the theatrical speculator remarked. "I took a comic opera company to India once, and lost a jolly big pot of money by the operation too."

"I was born and reared in the kingdom of Singah, and in the city of Singah, from which the kingdom takes its name, there was a statue of a god made of solid gold, and its eyes were a pair of blue diamonds, the stones so exactly alike in all respects that they could not be told apart," the East Indian went on.

"Well, when the people knelt to worship at that shrine they paid tribute to the golden calf surely enough!" the actress exclaimed.

"For hundreds of years the golden god had been enshrined in the temple at Singah, and though there had been revolts and wars, for many a time two men had claimed the rajahship of the kingdom and fought until one or the other was conquered, yet none of the warriors, no matter how greatly they needed money to carry on the struggle, ever dared to despoil the golden god of his treasures."

"Of course, the beggars were superstitious!" Fitzmaurice exclaimed. "They could have raised a good lot of money by seizing upon the god, but they were afraid that such a move would bring them bad luck."

"Yes, that was the way the people looked upon the matter, but in the year when the great mutiny took place in India there was a desperate struggle going on between two brothers for the possession of the kingdom," the Hindoo related.

"The elder, who was the rightful ruler, was a weak, irresolute fellow, but possessed a good heart, and would, undoubtedly, have made an excellent rajah, while the younger brother was a cunning rascal, as full of tricks as an egg is of meat."

"In all kingdoms, and under all rulers, there are always a lot of dissatisfied people who are glad to welcome any change, and so the younger brother found no difficulty in getting up a revolt, and managed the affair so well that the rajah was taken so by sur-

prise that he was obliged to flee in hot haste from the city of Singah which the insurgents immediately seized."

"By the one blow then he succeeded in gaining a most important advantage," Fitzmaurice remarked.

"Yes, but he was not able to follow up the success, for as soon as the real rajah raised an army the usurper was foolish enough to leave his walled city and to seek to crush the other army in a single decisive battle."

"Oh, yes, men will make mistakes of that kind," the manager declared.

"The fight went against the false brother, his army was cut to pieces, and with a mere handful of troops he managed to gain the city again," the Fakir exclaimed.

"As he had not soldiers enough to guard the walls he was obliged to take refuge in the temple, turning it into a citadel, first going to the desperate measure of expelling the priests."

"Well, I should think that was a very unwise move indeed," Fitzmaurice remarked.

"It was, for the priests roused the people against the wretches who had dared to profane the altars of the gods, and the men who had taken refuge in the temple found themselves like so many rats in a trap."

"In their desperation they resolved to make a bold attempt to cut their way through the host which surrounded them, but first the false rajah robbed the golden god of his diamond eyes."

"He wanted the wherewithal to pay the expenses of his flight in case he succeeded in making his way through the hostile lines which surrounded him," the manager suggested.

"A bare half-dozen of the desperate men succeeded in cutting their way through the line of steel which hemmed in the temple, and one of the six was the false rajah," the Hindoo continued.

"In their flight the fugitives separated, and the usurper, with a single attendant, tried to make his way to the interior where he might find a hiding-place."

"The attendant knew that the usurper had the blue diamonds, and so he murdered his master while he slept so he might possess himself of the precious stones."

"Oh! isn't it a horrible story?" Miss Ragsdale exclaimed.

"The legend of the blue diamonds is deeply tinged with blood from the beginning to the end," the Fakir replied in his solemn way.

"The jewels were the eyes of the great Hindoo god, and his influence caused them to bring bad luck to all mortals into whose possession the stones came."

"Ah, but I say, come now, you don't really believe that there is any truth in this yarn, do you?" the theatrical speculator exclaimed in a decidedly incredulous way.

The East Indian shook his head.

"What is my opinion worth in regard to the matter either one way or the other?" he asked in the peculiar non-committal way common to the men of his race.

"I will tell you the facts in the case and you can draw your own conclusion," the Fakir continued.

"After murdering his master the soldier fled with the diamonds, fell into a band of robbers, who took the jewels from him. In order to purchase his life the man told the story of how he had become possessed of the precious stones, and offered to join the outlaw band."

"He was a cunning fellow!" the manager exclaimed.

"The robbers immediately quarreled about the diamonds. Part of the band were superstitious and feared that the stolen eyes of the god would bring them bad luck, so they wished to return them, but the rest objected, saying it would be an easy matter to turn the jewels into money and they would bring gold enough to make them all rich."

"Sensible fellows!" Fitzmaurice exclaimed.

"Yes, that is what I say!" Tommy Ragsdale assented, for the first time taking part in the conversation.

"If I had been those coves I would have sold the sparklers and let the other duffers come in for the bad luck."

The actress shook her head in a reflective

way, gazing earnestly at the diamond, but did not speak.

"From words the robbers came to blows," the Fakir related, "and one-half of the band, including the soldier who had committed the murder, bit the dust before the strife ended.

"Then a detachment of English soldiers who had been in search of the robbers surprised them.

"There were six left of the outlaws, three were killed in resisting the soldiers, and the others, with the blue diamonds, were conveyed to the English headquarters and there the story of the jewels was told to the commanding officer.

"That night the mutiny began.

"This was a solitary outpost, and all the Englishmen were killed outright with the exception of the commanding officer who managed to gain the back of his horse, a wonderful fleet steed, and so escaped."

"And the blue diamonds?" asked the manager.

The Hindoo shook his head.

"No one knows what became of them," the Fakir answered.

"From that day to this no one has ever been able to tell anything at all about them," the Hindoo continued.

"When, after a vast expenditure of blood and treasure, the English succeeded in putting down the mutiny and India again became tranquil, the priests of the temple, from whose god the diamonds had been stolen, set on foot an investigation in order to discover what had become of their treasure; in this they were aided by the English rulers, for it has always been the policy of the British Government to keep on good terms with the priests, but despite the most exhaustive search no information whatever could be gained of the precious gems."

"A remarkably strange affair," Fitzmaurice observed. "The native chiefs who led the revolt were keen fellows, and it is certain that they were not the kind of chaps to throw away any valuable diamonds if they once got their paws on them."

"Very true," the Fakir responded. "But despite the keenest search no trace of the blue diamonds could be found. The priests of the temple, though, never despaired, for they felt sure that some day the jeweled eyes of the golden god would be returned."

"Ah, yes, I know the sort of breed these Hindoo priests are—there is a deal of the bulldog about them," the manager asserted.

"The holy men believed there was a charm attached to the blue diamonds, and they felt certain that the gems would in time find their way back to the temple, for they were positive they would bring such bad luck to any mortal who possessed them that the unfortunate man or woman into whose hands they fell would be only too glad to get rid of them."

"Well, if this story you have told is correct the diamonds certainly seem to have brought the worst kind of luck upon the people who got possession of them," the blonde burlesquer remarked in a thoughtful way, and from the expression upon her face it was plain that the recital of the Fakir had produced a great effect upon her.

"Ah, it's all gammon!" Tommy Ragsdale declared. "I don't believe a word of the yarn! Just you give me a chance to get hold of sparklers worth three or four thousand dollars apiece and see how quickly I will grab them, and I would not give a snap of my finger either for all the heathen gods that ever existed."

"Yes, yes, Tommy, your courage is well known," the actress remarked in a very sarcastic way. "You have given proof many a time that you possess the heart of a lion."

Fitzmaurice laughed outright at this, for the brother of the beautiful actress had played the coward on so many occasions that it was supremely ridiculous for him to pretend that he possessed any courage.

"Well, I don't set up to being no hero," Tommy responded in a sulky way. "But I ain't to be scared out of my wits by any old women stories."

"Of course it may be possible that this beautiful trinket, which looks so grandly on your alabaster hand, is not one of the jewels stolen from the golden god," the Hindoo remarked.

"But to your thinking, though, it bears a strong resemblance to the stones which formed the eyes of the statue," Miss Ragsdale remarked.

"Yes, they are as alike as two peas," the Fakir replied.

"I suppose that you have seen the diamonds often, and so are well posted about the matter," Fitzmaurice remarked.

"Oh, yes, as a child I was employed to wait upon the priests of the temple, and so was in the habit of seeing the golden god daily, and therefore became so well acquainted with the appearance of the diamonds that it would not be possible for me to forget how they looked."

"Well, of course, I don't know anything about the history of the stone, so I cannot say whether it came from India originally or not," the actress explained, gazing at the jewel in a reflective way as she spoke.

"It does not belong to me, you see; I did not buy it," she continued. "I am only taking care of it for a friend, who does not wish to wear it."

"Have you any objections to telling me the name of the person?" the Fakir asked in his grave and gentle way.

"Oh, no; the diamond belongs to Mr. Van Courtlandt," the actress answered.

"The gentleman who owns the horse named Doldale?" the Hindoo asked.

"Yes, the same."

"The failure of his horse to win the race has brought him to the brink of ruin, they say," the East Indian remarked. "I heard the gossip at the hotel to-night, when I went to see Mr. Fitzmaurice."

"The racing men were talking the matter over, and some of them said that they would not be surprised if the young man blew out his brains before morning, for he never would be able to meet his obligations, his losses being so heavy."

"Well, it must be admitted that the possession of the blue diamond certainly did not bring him any luck!" the theatrical speculator exclaimed.

"Ah, yes, but that is probably only a coincidence," Miss Ragsdale remarked. "For it does not seem possible that there can be any truth in the notion that a little bit of a stone like this blue diamond can have the power to bring either good or bad fortune to any one."

"In itself the stone is nothing—it is the curse of the despoiled god which the diamond carries with it that does the damage," the Fakir replied in his grave way.

"Still it may not be the diamond taken from the temple," the Hindoo added.

"The chances are that it isn't, and so, Miss Ragsdale, if I were you I would not allow the matter to worry me at all," Fitzmaurice observed.

Then the subject was dropped and the conversation turned to theatrical matters.

An hour or so they conversed and then Fitzmaurice and the Hindoo departed.

Although the actress had not admitted that the legend had made much impression upon her yet in reality it had.

CHAPTER XVI.

TOMMY'S SUSPICIONS.

TOMMY RAGSDALE was too well acquainted with the actress, though, not to be aware that the Fakir's story had made a strong impression upon her, and so when they were together in the upper sitting-room, eating the lunch which after the fashion of theatrical people they were always accustomed to take before going to bed, he referred to the matter.

"I say, Dolly, you are a little worried over the yarn that the Fakir told," he said.

"Well, I don't know as I am exactly worried about the matter," she replied, slowly.

"But I most assuredly would be if I thought there was any truth in the story."

"I have thought of a way to work the trick," Tommy observed with a chuckle.

"Yes?"

"Hock' the sparkler!"

"Pawn it?"

"That is the ticket!"

"Yes, I might do that," the actress observed in a thoughtful way.

"Certainly! What is to hinder?" the

brother asked. "I will take it to the pawnshop and get as much money as I can on it, then you can put the brass into another diamond, so you will have the satisfaction of having an additional sparkler to wear, and if Van Courtlandt should want his diamond at any time you will be able to get it for him without any trouble."

"Yes, the idea is a good one, and I will do it just as soon as I have any real luck, which I can ascribe to the possession of the diamond."

"Mind you, I don't believe there is any truth in the yarn at all!" Tommy asserted, stoutly.

"I don't have much faith in foreign chaps of the style of this Fakir, anyhow," the brother continued.

"Well, he seems to be a tolerably decent sort of a man," the actress remarked.

"Ah, yes, but foreign fellows like this one are apt to be precious deep, and up to all sorts of tricks," Tommy argued.

"He does not seem to be that sort of a man," the sister replied.

"You can't tell much about these foreigners by their looks," the other replied.

"How do you know now that this duffer hasn't put up a game on you?"

"A game?"

"Yes, he knows that this blue diamond is a mighty valuable stone, for what these Hindoos don't know about jewels isn't worth knowing."

"Oh, I don't doubt that that is true enough," Miss Ragsdale agreed. "But I don't understand how he could play any game."

"Suppose he took the notion into his head that he would like to get hold of the sparkler at a low figure?" Tommy suggested.

"Oh, yes, I see."

"You can bet your life, you know, that the Fakir knows the value of the stone to a dollar."

"Very likely."

"If he wanted to get the diamond at a low price it would be his game to do all he could to make you want to get rid of it."

"Yes, that is true."

"And he is cunning enough to know that you, like most of the woman who are on the stage, are inclined to be a little superstitious, and to have a good deal of faith in good and bad luck, so it would be just his game to hatch up some cock and bull story like this golden god yarn, in order to make you believe that the diamond would bring you bad luck."

"Well, there may be something in this idea of yours, Tommy," the blonde actress remarked, slowly.

"These foreigners are just the kind of chaps to be up to tricks of the kind!" the brother declared.

"Now, you just wait and see if he doesn't offer to buy the diamond from you," he continued.

"Ah, yes, but he knows that the diamond does not belong to me, for I told him so, and I can not sell somebody else's property."

"Very true, but if he gets you dissatisfied with it and you return it to Van Courtlandt, then he may be able to buy it from him at a low price," the brother replied.

"Ah, yes, that is more likely than your other suggestion," Miss Ragsdale remarked.

"But you can rely upon it that I am not going to be scared into parting with the diamond," she added.

"It will take more than a mere story to make me give the jewel up."

"Well, we have got our eyes open, and this Hindoo will have to be smarter than I think he is if he can make any more in a game to get hold of the diamond without our being up to his dodges!" the brother asserted in the most confident manner.

"Oh, yes, we are neither one of us children," the actress replied.

"On the contrary we are as fully up to snuff as the most of the sharpers, and it will be a wonderfully clever fellow who succeeds in pulling the wool over our eyes."

"Right you are!" Tommy exclaimed, emphatically. "We wasn't born yesterday!"

"Oh, no, we are fully able to take care of ourselves."

Then the pair bid each other good-night and departed for their bedrooms which were on different floors.

CHAPTER XVII.

UNWELCOME VISITORS.

THE blonde burlesquer felt strangely ill at ease after retiring to her room.

She occupied a front apartment on the second floor with the windows looking to the sea.

The room was fitted up in the most elaborate manner, and if it had been the abode of a princess the furniture and adornments could not have been more sumptuous.

Right beneath the window was the roof of the veranda and as the actress looked out of the casement her gaze fell upon the structure.

"It would not be a very difficult matter for any robber to climb to the roof of the veranda and then get into the room through the windows," she murmured.

And then she carefully examined the fastenings of the casement.

"I have often heard how these cracksmen get into houses by slipping a thin-bladed knife in between the sashes and forcing back the window catches, but no such game as that could be worked with these fastenings."

This was the truth, for the catches were patented ones, designed expressly to foil housebreakers.

"It is strange how uneasy and restless I feel to-night," the actress remarked as she began to prepare to disrobe.

There was a small safe in the room which had the appearance of a desk, and into this the actress placed all her valuables.

"Anyway if housebreakers did succeed in getting in, they would not be able to secure much valuable booty," Miss Ragsdale soliloquized as she closed the safe door and adjusted the combination.

Then she completed her preparation for bed, turned down the gas, but left one jet still burning so that the apartment was dimly illuminated, and sought her couch.

It was close to midnight when the actress went to bed, and for fully an hour she lay awake, tossing restlessly from side to side, much to her disgust, for this was a new experience, for, as a rule, she was usually fast asleep within ten minutes after she touched the bed.

"Drat that blue diamond!" she exclaimed. "If it is going to worry the life out of me the quicker I get rid of it the better!"

She heard the silver-toned clock on the mantel-piece strike one and then she gradually dropped off to sleep.

But when the slumber came it was a most uneasy one, all sorts of bad dreams tormented her, and she moved restlessly from side to side.

And now leaving the actress safely in the bonds of sleep we will turn our attention to a man coming along through the open common in the rear of the actress's cottage.

He was a medium-sized fellow, dressed plainly in a dark suit, and wearing a black soft hat well pulled down on his forehead.

There wasn't anything particularly suspicious-looking about the man; on the contrary he had a pleasant face, and was a fellow who would have been apt to make a good impression almost anywhere.

Yet this good-looking young fellow was one of the most dangerous crooks that had ever crossed the water.

He was an Englishman, by name David Batheart, but from his peculiar habit of always wearing a smile he was known among his pals as Smiler Dave.

He was an all-around crook, in contradiction to the general rule, being an expert in all lines, and able to turn his hand to anything, from cracking the safe in a bank to robbing a guileless shopkeeper out of a few dollars by the flim flam game.

When Smiler reached the low fence which separated the cottage grounds from the common, he hesitated a moment, cast a careful glance around, in order to satisfy himself that no one was keeping a watch upon him, and then climbed over.

The grounds of the cottage were well filled with bushes and trees, so there was ample shade, and there was little danger that any one lurking within the garden could be seen from the outside, if any of the limited police force of the summer city happened to pass along the avenue.

The intruder passed through the garden with cautious steps and proceeded directly to the back door.

By the rear entrance, in the shadow of a clump of evergreens, two men were concealed, and they rose to greet the new-comer as he approached.

These two were men whose personal appearance was decidedly against them.

They were short in stature, thick-set, and had the peculiar slouchy air common to men who gain their living by dark and devious means, and are always afraid of being collared by the police.

Well known were the pair to the principal detectives all over the country, for they were two crooks who had done time in a dozen prisons.

The taller of the two, who was almost as dark in complexion as a negro, was known as Blacky; James Navel was his right appellation.

His companion, whose face plainly betrayed his Teutonic origin, was called John Pumpnickle, but among his associates he was usually termed Dutchy.

The pair had evidently been waiting for Smiler, who was just the man to act as captain in a housebreaking expedition.

"Well, how goes it, boys?" the new-comer asked.

"Everything is all right," Blacky answered. "I pumped the nigger butler to-day and got all the information necessary."

"That is good!" Smiler exclaimed.

"You know I told you I thought I could do the trick the moment I discovered the coon was stuck on the races and imagined he was going to make his eternal fortune by picking the winners," Blacky remarked.

"And you played the old 'tout' game on him, I suppose?" Smiler said.

"Yes, that was just the lay I went on," the crook replied with a chuckle. "I made out that I was hand in glove with all the stable men and so I could get points about the hosses which nobody else could pick up."

"And the coon swallowed the ghost story?" Smiler remarked.

"Oh, yes, fairly jumped for it, and he is so dead gone on the bob tailed nags that I did not have any difficulty in getting out of him all I wanted to know."

"Anything difficult about the job?" Smiler asked.

"Only one thing and that is, the actress keeps her valuable in a safe in her bedroom," the other replied.

"That is rather awkward," Smiler remarked. "For we will have to force her to open the safe which will be a somewhat disagreeable job but the trick cannot be worked in any other way."

"Well, let us set to work to get into the crib," the crook continued.

It was not a difficult task for such experienced rascals as these three to force an entrance into the cottage, although the rear door was guarded by a good lock and stout bolt.

The lock they picked with a skeleton key and the bolt yielded to the pressure of a "jimmy," as the short steel crowbar-like tool of the housebreaker is termed.

Dutchy was left to keep watch and the other two stole up-stairs, first taking the precaution to put on masks so as to hide their faces.

The door of Miss Ragsdale's apartment was only guarded by a simple lock, and the cracksmen, after they discovered that the key had not been removed, easily unlocked the door by the aid of a pair of strong pincers by means of which they grasped the end of the key from the outside and so turned it in the lock.

The single gas jet, still dimly burning, afforded ample light.

Smiler glanced around the room so as to familiarize himself with all the particulars, then he took up the loose wrapper which the actress had discarded upon going to rest and placed it upon the bed by the side of the sleeping woman, after this he seated himself upon the chair by the bedside, drew an ugly-looking knife, an eight inch "bowie," and proceeded to arouse the sleeper.

This he did as gently as possible.

"Madam—madam!" he exclaimed, laying his hand upon the arm of the actress and shaking her a little.

Miss Ragsdale was a light sleeper, one easily awakened, and so she soon opened her eyes, staring in astonishment at the masked man menacing her with the knife.

"Do not scream, madam, or attempt to call for assistance for it will cost you your life if you do so," Smiler declared, as soon as he saw that the sleeper was awake.

"If you will be quiet and reasonable, and do as I say, no harm shall come to you," the intruder continued.

"We are tax-gatherers, you must understand, and it is our business to relieve you of little of your surplus wealth."

"You have plenty and can easily spare it; we are poor and need it."

By this time the actress had recovered in a measure from the alarm which had at first seized upon her.

"Really, sir, I do not think I have much money to give you," she remarked. "You see it is not my custom to keep money in the house," Miss Ragsdale continued. "There may be thirty or forty dollars in my purse but not any more."

"We will be very glad to take the money, of course, although it is not a large sum," the housebreaker replied, with great politeness.

"But, Miss Ragsdale, will you pardon me if I remind you that if you have not got money you have some really elegant diamonds?"

"Diamonds!" the actress exclaimed, and immediately to her mind came the remembrance of the blue diamond.

Was it possible that because she had the strange jewel in her possession she was placed in the power of these midnight ruffians?

"Yes, your diamonds are what we are after," Smiler replied.

"We know all about them—they are locked up in the safe yonder, and we will have to trouble you to open the safe for us."

"How can I do it? It is really dreadful that you should want my diamonds!" the actress exclaimed, in a pathetic manner.

"You will have lots of trouble to get rid of them, you know, and you are almost certain to be caught when you attempt to turn them into cash," she continued.

"Oh, yes, there is considerable risk about the matter; we understand all about that, but we will have to risk it nevertheless," the cracksmen responded, in a light and airy way.

"We will really have to trouble you to open the safe for us, so we can get the diamonds."

"You understand, I hope, that we do not want to put you to any more trouble than is necessary," he hastened to say.

"And I am fully aware that we are taking a great liberty to intrude upon you in this manner, but as the trick could not be accomplished in any other way, we had to do it, but it is our intention to make everything as agreeable for you as possible."

"Here is your wrapper, it will only take you a moment to put it on; we will turn our backs while you rise, if you will give us your word that you will not abuse our confidence and attempt to alarm the house."

"You understand, madam, I hope, that we are desperate men, and it would surely cost you dearly if you should attempt to do anything of the kind."

"We are anxious not to harm a hair of your head, but if you attempt anything likely to put us in peril, we will have to take severe measures, no matter how reluctant we may be to do anything of the kind."

The actress stared at the speaker, her cheeks pale with fright.

She was not a brave woman at heart, although, at times, when the situation demanded it, she could talk loud, bluster, and pretend to be very courageous, but when, as in the present instance, she was brought face to face with real danger, she soon showed that she was a coward.

The sight of the glittering knife struck terror to her soul, and from the way in which the masked robber spoke, she was fully satisfied that the man would not hesitate to murder her if she attempted to give an alarm.

What was a few thousand dollars worth of diamonds compared to her precious life?

Although the actress was not brave, yet she was extremely cunning, and though she

was terribly frightened, yet she retained self possession enough to be able to take a good view of the situation.

Even if the robbers did succeed in getting away with the diamonds, there was a chance, and an extremely good one in Miss Ragsdale's opinion, that the police would be able to recover the jewels, and so under the circumstances she speedily came to the conclusion that she would be a great big fool to risk her life by refusing to comply with the demand of the midnight marauders.

These thoughts flew rapidly through the brain of the actress and so she only hesitated for a few moments before she spoke.

She was one who believed in always accepting the situation with as good a grace as possible and so, notwithstanding she was so horribly frightened, she put on her sweetest smile and said:

"You are really acting in such a gentlemanly way that I feel that I ought to do what I can to oblige you, so if you and your companion will have the kindness to turn your backs I will put on my dress, and then open the safe for you."

"We will be very much obliged," Smiler replied with a polite bow, but as the ready compliance of the woman with his demand made him a little suspicious, he hastened to add:

"Of course you understand that I meant what I said when I told you that if you attempted to give an alarm it would cost you your life."

"Oh, yes," the actress replied quickly, "and I beg you to believe that I do not mean to do anything of the kind."

"I am not so foolish as to risk my life for a few diamonds!"

"There is where you are wise, for with your wonderful abilities for coining money you can easily get more diamonds, but if you lose your life you cannot get another one," Smiler remarked, grimly.

"Yes, yes, I am well aware of that fact and I assure you that I do not intend to make any trouble."

"Very well, I am glad you are sensible. We have to do this sort of thing all in the way of business, you know, but when we are dealing with a lady we try to make everything as agreeable as possible."

"Now, Miss Ragsdale, we will give you a chance to dress, and please have the kindness not to keep us waiting any longer than is absolutely necessary," the gentlemanly crook requested with another polite bow.

"I will not be a minute!" the actress exclaimed. "For I can assure you that I am just as anxious to get rid of you as you can possibly be to depart."

The crooks laughed, and Miss Ragsdale lost no time in assuming her dressing-gown and slippers.

Her mind worked rapidly during these few minutes.

Was there no chance for her to trick the robbers in any way without risking the loss of her life?

No, not one!

She must open the safe, for she felt sure that these masked men were desperate fellows who would not hesitate to commit murder if she provoked their rage.

And then to her mind again came the remembrance of the blue diamond.

Was it possible that there was any truth in the tale that ill-luck attended all who had the precious stone in their possession?

It seemed like a story from the dark ages, but one thing was sure, she had traveled all over the world and this was the first time that robbers had ever molested her.

Was their visit due to the fact that she had the blue diamond?

It was very odd indeed, and the bewildered actress did not know what to make of it.

And then the thought came to her that if there was any truth in the story the midnight plunderers would speedily have cause to regret the moment when they conceived the idea of robbing her of her valuables.

"Now, gentlemen, I am at your service," Miss Ragsdale said, after she had finished dressing.

"If you will have the kindness to open the safe we will be very much obliged," Smiler remarked with a polite bow.

The actress complied with the request

and then when the treasure box was open Smiler said:

"Now, Miss Ragsdale, since you are acting like a lady about this matter, we propose to do the fair thing by you, so will not take anything but the diamonds and what cash you may have; the rest of the jewelry we will allow you to retain."

"I am very much obliged," the actress replied.

And then the eyes of the crook fell upon the blue diamond.

"Hello! there is a beauty!" he exclaimed.

"Yes, it is a very rare and costly stone," Miss Ragsdale replied.

"It is just such a sparkler as I would like to wear if I could afford such a luxury, but men in my line can't indulge in things of that kind," the crook leader remarked.

"Now if you will kindly pass over the jewels and your cash I will be much obliged."

The actress complied with the request with as good a grace as possible.

Smiler stowed the gems and money away securely in an inside pocket.

"And now, Miss Ragsdale, we will have to trouble you to come with us to the door, so we will be able to get a fair start before you give an alarm," the crook said.

Perforce the actress was obliged to comply, willing or unwilling.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE POLICE TAKE A HAND.

SMILER had taken the precaution to ascertain that the key of the parlor door was in the lock before he and his companion proceeded up-stairs and when the three arrived on the first floor the crook explained that he would be obliged to lock the actress up in the parlor.

"Of course you will try to give an alarm as soon as possible," he continued. "That is only natural under the circumstances, and I do not blame you, but I must take measures to get as good a start as I can, and the longer I can keep you from alarming the house the better it will be for me."

"Oh, yes, I suppose so," the actress answered, not knowing exactly what to say.

Then the crook requested Miss Ragsdale to walk into the parlor, turned the key in the lock, and with his companion hurried through the rear door.

"All is serene!" Dutchy exclaimed as his pals made their appearance. "Not a soul has put in an appearance."

"We must give leg-bail as fast as we can, for we have made a big haul and the chances are that a fearful row will be kicked up about it!" Smiler exclaimed as the three hurried through the garden to the commons.

Leaving the marauders to pursue their way we will return to the blonde burlesquer.

She was very angry at being despoiled of her valuables, and though she did not dare to give an alarm immediately for fear that the crooks might return and harm her, yet after she had waited about five minutes—the time passing so slowly that it seemed to her as if it was twice as long as it really was—she judged she ought to proceed.

The Englishwoman was naturally shrewd and while she waited she had formed a plan to secure her liberty.

She had listened at the door after being locked in the parlor and from the sound of the robbers' retreating footsteps judged that they had left the house by the rear door, and she calculated that under the peculiar circumstances they would not take the trouble to attempt to fasten the door after them.

All she had to do then was to get out of the parlor by means of one of the windows, go around to the back door and she could get into the house.

This she accomplished easily enough, and then she hurried to her room and proceeded to dress herself, for now that her fright was over she had made up her mind to leave no stone unturned to secure the bold robbers.

After her toilet was completed the actress hurried to her brother's room and banged away at the door until he was awakened.

"What is the matter?" he asked.

"Get up and dress yourself as soon as you can—the house has been robbed and the police must be summoned!" Miss Ragsdale replied.

After this startling announcement it did

not take Tommy Ragsdale long to get into his clothes.

"Well, well, here is a rum go!" he exclaimed after the actress had related the particulars of what had occurred.

"What had we better do?" he asked.

"The police must be notified at once so that they may pursue the rascals!"

"Oh, yes, of course, no doubt that is the proper caper," Tommy remarked, scratching his head in a doubtful sort of way. "But I'm blamed if I know just how to go about it."

"Ah, you are a stupid donkey if ever there was one!" the blonde burlesquer exclaimed angrily. "But you never did have any head for business!"

"Yes, but this 'ere thing is something that I don't know anything about," he complained. "I never had nothing to do with any policemen, and blamed if I know how to go at it."

"You are a natural born donkey, and that is what is the matter with you!" Miss Ragsdale retorted.

"But I will tell you what you had better do. Go to the West End Hotel, find Mr. Fitzmaurice, explain the matter to him, and say from me that I will be very much obliged if he will take charge of the affair."

"Ah, yes, that is it! that is the ticket!" the brother exclaimed, rubbing his hands together in delight. "You can depend upon Foxy Fitzzy to do the job right up to the handle."

"Don't stop to talk but hurry off as soon as possible!" the actress urged.

"Oh, yes, I will not allow the grass to grow under my feet!" Tommy declared, and then he hurried away.

The man was as good as his word too and made quick time to the hotel.

Fitzmaurice was awakened without any trouble and hurried to dress himself as soon as he understood what was required.

"It would be an excellent advertising dodge," he remarked, "only the trouble is that it will be hard work to persuade the people it isn't got up on purpose to create a stir in the newspapers."

"The stolen diamond racket has been worked so often that the public have taken a tumble to the whole business, and when this story comes out in the newspapers the odds are big that nine out of ten men will think that it is only a yarn got up for advertising purposes."

"But this is a sure enough robbery and no mistake—worse luck!" Tommy declared.

"Yes, but it will be hard work to make the people believe it," the theatrical speculator replied.

Events proved how correct was this opinion.

There was a detective on duty at the hotel and the night clerk suggested that he should be roused for he knew where the chief of police could be found.

A team was ordered and the hotel detective awakened from his slumbers.

But, when the matter was explained to him he remarked that it was an old gag, and although it might be a good one he did not see the necessity of getting a man out of bed in the middle of the night to assist in working it.

At last Fitzmaurice succeeded in convincing the detective that the robbery was no theatrical gag but that Miss Ragsdale had really been plundered of diamonds worth a good ten thousand dollars, and what was more to the point, the lady would undoubtedly be willing to pay a good round reward for the recovery of the sparklers.

This was a spur to urge the detective on.

But when the chief of police was roused from his slumber Fitzmaurice had just the same trouble in making him believe the account of the robbery was correct as he had had with the hotel detective.

Finally the chief was convinced, then a couple of his assistants had to be hunted up, so it was about four o'clock in the morning—the gray rays of the coming dawn were beginning to line the eastern skies—when the party arrived at Miss Ragsdale's cottage.

It did not take the experienced man-hunters long to discover how the rascals had got into the house, but where they had gone after the robbery was committed was a mystery.

All possible means were employed to trace

the robbers, fifty men tried their wits on the case, professional and amateur bloodhounds, but the search was all in vain.

The crooks had got safely off and left no trail behind.

CHAPTER XIX.

JOE PHENIX TAKES THE CASE.

THE village bloodhounds who went to work with such zeal to track the robbers were like the rest of their class the world over.

They had the firmest belief that they were natural born thief-catchers, and were decidedly of the opinion that what they did not know about man-hunting was not worth knowing, so when they were not able to get the slightest clue to the robbers they fell back upon the old dodge of pretending to believe that there had not been any robbery at all.

Of course they did not come right out and declare that they did not believe the actress had been robbed; they were too cunning to make an assertion of that kind, but by means of winks, knowing shakes of the head, and sly insinuations they contrived to convey the impression that they did not put much faith in Miss Ragsdale's story of the robbery.

The theatrical manager, Fitzmaurice, was too acute a man not to speedily perceive how the police regarded the matter, and he lost no time in communicating the information to the burlesque actress.

"These confounded fools will not be able to do anything!" the speculator declared. "Because they were not smart enough to hit off the track right away they have taken the idea into their precious noddles that there has not been any robbery."

"What a ridiculous notion!" the actress exclaimed, angrily.

"Of course, it is perfectly absurd!" Fitzmaurice responded. "But it is a very old game. Because they cannot find any trace of the robbers they are trying to cover up their blundering by insinuating that there are no robbers to be found."

"I never heard of a bigger piece of nonsense in my life!" Miss Ragsdale asserted.

"They are pretending to believe that it is all an advertising dodge on your part," the manager explained.

"Oh, yes, it is all very well for people who haven't got any reputation to try a trick of that kind so as to get their names in the newspapers, but a woman who has made the success that I have in England and in this country does not have to resort to any tricks of that kind!" the actress exclaimed in a tone full of lofty contempt.

"Very true, but these stupid countrymen don't know the difference between the actress who can command a couple of hundred dollars a week and the back-row ballet girl who has hard work to get five."

"A lot of ignorant blockheads!" Miss Ragsdale declared.

"Exactly; that is just what they are, and it is an old saying, you know, that you can't make a silk purse out of a pig's ear," the theatrical manager observed with the air of a philosopher.

"The crooks who got away with the diamonds are old hands at the business evidently, for they did not leave a trace behind to show which way they came or which way they went, and as these bunglers are completely baffled, the only way they can get out of the scrape is for them to insinuate that there hasn't been any robbery."

"Well, if they have got any such notion as that in their heads, I don't suppose there is much chance of their either catching the thieves or getting back my diamonds," Miss Ragsdale observed in a disconsolate way.

"Not one chance in a thousand, to my thinking!" Fitzmaurice replied.

"But what is to be done?" the actress exclaimed, angrily. "Am I to lose my jewels and have to tamely submit to the outrage? Why, the idea is monstrous!"

"You will not be likely to get much aid from these countrymen, for this affair is altogether too big a job for them to handle," the speculator remarked. "I will go to New York and give the case into the hands of a first-class metropolitan man."

"Ah, yes, that is a capital idea!" the actress exclaimed.

"I know a fellow who has done some wonderful things in the detective line, and if I can get him to undertake the case, and there isn't much doubt but what I can, I think the chances are good that he will be able to accomplish something."

"I sincerely hope so, for it is no joke to be robbed in this wholesale way!" Miss Ragsdale declared.

"This gentleman is in the private detective line, has an office of his own and undertakes special business."

"Yes, I understand—Special Enquiry offices, as they call them in London."

"Exactly!" Fitzmaurice replied. "This man is named Phenix—Joe Phenix. He used to be in the regular detective force and performed some astonishing facts in capturing criminals; in fact he is a regular American Vidocq, and I think the chances are great that if he undertakes the case he will be able to do something with it."

"You ought to see him as soon as possible," the actress urged. "The quicker he takes hold of the case the better, I should think."

"Yes, that is true," the speculator replied. "I will take the first train for New York."

Then he consulted a time-table which he had in his pocket.

"I can catch an Express in half-an-hour which runs through to New York without a stop," he added.

"That will do nicely!" Miss Ragsdale exclaimed. "And understand, Fitzzy, I don't mind paying a good price to get my diamonds back, so don't hesitate if the job is going to be an expensive one."

"Oh, I shouldn't, but this Phenix is no shark; on the contrary he is the squarest kind of a fellow, and you can depend upon his doing what is right," Fitzmaurice explained.

"I would like to get my jewels back of course, but it would also give me a deal of pleasure if the rascals who committed the robbery were also placed in limbo," the actress announced.

"Certainly, of course, that goes without saying!" the manager exclaimed.

"You not only want to recover the sparklers but you want satisfaction as well."

"Yes, and I am willing to pay a good round price for it."

"You can depend upon this Mr. Phenix doing his best to nab the rascals as well as to recover the property. He is not the kind of man to want to compromise with rascals. But I will be off, and you can rest assured that when this bloodhound gets on the track of the scoundrels he will be certain to make it warm for them."

Miss Ragsdale expressed her thanks in a becoming manner, and Fitzmaurice hurried off to catch his train.

When he arrived in New York he consulted a Directory in order to learn the address of the detective, and then proceeded to the office of the renowned man-hunter.

He was fortunate enough to find the detective in, a tall, muscular man with a lion-like head, and massive, yet mobile features, which wore a grave—even a sad look.

The theatrical speculator had a slight acquaintance with the detective, having been introduced to him at a popular up-town resort, and although he thought it was necessary to recall the matter to the mind of the man-hunter he was immediately assured by that gentleman that the meeting had not been forgotten by him.

Then Fitzmaurice explained his business and the detective jotted down the particulars in his memorandum-book.

Fitzmaurice too explained the view that the country policemen took of the matter.

Joe Phenix smiled.

"A lot of blarsted jay policemen!" the manager declared indignantly.

"The jay policemen, as you call them, are not the only men who try a game of that kind when they encounter a case with which they cannot do anything," the acute detective remarked.

"I have known men right here in New York—men too with good reputations in the thief-catching line, who have fallen back on a declaration of that kind when rogues of whom they were in search proved to be too smart for them."

"Well, I suppose human nature is about

the same whether the man lives in the city or in the country," Fitzmaurice remarked. "It is natural for one when a failure is made to cast about for some excuse to cover up the true reason. A man doesn't like to come right out and admit that he is not as smart as he pretends to be."

"Judging from the particulars which you have given me, this job was done by old and experienced crooks, and it is not going to be an easy matter to catch them," the detective remarked.

"Oh, yes, I fully understand that, and I am authorized by Miss Ragsdale to tell you to go ahead without regard to the expense," the manager replied.

"You do not exactly understand me," the man-hunter observed. "I do not speak with a view of enhancing the difficulties of the situation, so that I might ask a higher price for my services, but I was going to suggest that with the circumstances as they are it would be a wise measure to call upon the chief of the New York police for assistance."

"Yes, yes, that certainly would be a good idea, but the robbery was not committed in this city," Fitzmaurice suggested.

"Very true, but it is almost absolutely certain that the plunder was brought immediately to New York, and so the affair comes under the supervision of the metropolitan police."

"True, very true," Fitzmaurice observed. "I had not taken that fact into consideration."

"The first point in the game which these crooks played was to secure the plunder," the detective observed.

"Well, they certainly managed to take that trick all right, and it must be admitted that the work was done in a superior manner," the manager declared.

"Oh, yes, and from the way the job was performed there is no doubt that it was the work of old and experienced professional cracksmen, as I said before, and now after having won the first trick they will proceed to the second, and that will be to turn their plunder into money."

"That will be done through some 'fence,' of course—some man who makes a business of receiving stolen goods," Fitzmaurice suggested.

"Yes, and by giving timely notice to the chief of police he will give a warning notice to all his men to be on the alert and so the rascals may be nabbed."

"Yes, yes, I see."

"The first thing the chief will do will be to ask his detectives and police spies what crooks they have noticed around town who would be able to do a first-class job of this kind," the detective explained.

"I comprehend, and if the chief finds that there are some crooks in the city who are noted for this particular kind of robbery he will have them sharply looked after."

"Yes, that is the way he will proceed. I will go with you to the chief's office, and after we arrange matters with him, will accompany you to Long Branch, so as to make a personal examination of the scene of the robbery."

"That is necessary, of course," Fitzmaurice remarked.

"Yes, and it is important too that no one in the household should have any suspicion of the nature of the business which brings me to Miss Ragsdale's cottage," the detective remarked.

"I see what you are driving at!" the manager declared with a sagacious nod.

"You have a suspicion that some one of the inmates of the house may have had some thing to do with the robbery."

"Yes, it is always safe to go upon an assumption of the kind, although it is not invariably correct," Joe Phenix replied.

"It does not do any harm though to act on the supposition," the manager suggested.

"Well, the matter can be arranged easily enough. I can introduce you as a newspaper man anxious to get all the details so as to write up an account of the robbery," Fitzmaurice continued.

"Yes, that will do."

The detective then went with the manager to the inspector of police and gave a full account of the robbery.

The chief promised to give the matter his

personal attention, and then the pair departed for the Summer City.

At the cottage of the actress Joe Phenix made a careful examination.

"This trick was done from the outside, and without inside help," was his conclusion. "I shall be only wasting time to remain here. New York is the hunting ground!" the veteran detective declared.

CHAPTER XX.

HOW THE ROGUE ESCAPED.

AND now we will relate how it was that the rogues managed to make their escape without leaving any clue for the police to work upon.

By keeping away from the streets and going through the open fields they avoided the possibility of encountering any one, and at such an hour there were few people abroad even in the most frequented places in the neighborhood of the big hotels.

The three crooks went on until they came to the river and there embarked on a boat which they had evidently had in readiness.

Down the river they went; as it happened there was an ebb tide, and as they had two pairs of oars the boat went on at a good pace.

In due time they reached the bridge, rowing across the river to the Highlands, and on the sea side of the structure a small sloop was moored.

This craft the crooks boarded.

It was about the size of the boats commonly used by the clam-diggers and fishermen, was provided with a small covered cabin, big enough to afford snug accommodations to the three, and there wasn't anything about the craft to excite suspicion that she was not all right.

The men at once got up sail, and as there was a fair southwesterly wind, it did not take the little sloop long to run out of the river, and when they reached the "Horse-shoe," as the peculiar sort of bay formed by the long point of Sandy Hook is called, they laid their course straight for New York.

And it was on account of the crooks putting in practice this dodge of making their escape from Long Branch by water that the bloodhounds of the Summer City were not able to find any trace of them.

Not a soul had seen them depart, and there are no tracks on the ebbing tide by means of which a fugitive can be followed.

The wind was a favorable one, and the little craft being a good sailer, and well handled—Black Jim had put in some of his younger years "before the mast"—made her way toward the metropolis at a good rate of speed.

The crooks were in high glee over their successful raid.

"We have got the boodle all right," Smiler remarked. "And now the next thing on the programme is to turn it into money."

"Yes, that is the game," Black Jim responded. "How much do you think we have collared?"

"Oh, I don't know—it is hard to say," the chief crook replied in a reflective way.

"The diamonds are magnificent ones, and there are quite a number of them," Black Jim observed.

"Yes, it is by far the best haul in that line that I ever made, and I suppose the sparklers probably cost twelve or fifteen thousand dollars," Smiler remarked.

The eyes of the others gleamed with delight, and they smacked their lips in gloat- ing anticipation.

Smiler noticed the looks and indulged in a quiet laugh.

"Now, boys, don't get your anticipation up too high!" he exclaimed.

"Although I do not doubt that the boodle is worth every cent of the amount that I have named, yet the chances are big that we will not be able to get a quarter of the sum," he explained.

"Oh, yes, I understand," Black Jim observed in a sulky way. "You mean that the blamed fence will not be willing to give us more than a quarter the diamonds are worth."

"Yes, that is exactly what I mean," Smiler replied. "If we can get three or four thousand in cold cash we will be lucky."

"It is a downright shame though for us to be robbed in any such way as that after our hard work," Dutchy declared.

"Just look at the risk we run, and then those old thieves are not willing to give more than a quarter of the actual value of the swag," he continued.

"Of course the fence takes some risk too," Smiler observed. "For if the police happened to be fly enough to catch him with the stolen goods in his possession he is sure to lose what he paid out, and then there is the chance that he may be hauled into court and have to stand trial."

"Ah, yes, but loss of money is about all the fence has to fear," Black Jim argued. "It isn't once in ten years that a fence is caught so dead to rights by the fly cops that he gets a chance to go to the stone jug up the river," Black Jim remarked.

"That is correct," Smiler admitted. "The fences are too smart to be easily caught, and when they get hold of valuables like these diamonds they always go to work as soon as possible to fix the things so that the owners will be puzzled to identify them."

"The melting-pot is always ready, and it does not take many minutes to knock the diamonds out of their settings, then into the pot goes the gold, and it is soon run into a solid lump, and then the diamonds are mixed with other uncut stones, and under such circumstances nobody but an expert diamond-dealer who had been buying and selling precious stones for years, would be able to pick out particular stones," the chief crook continued.

As he had been leading a crooked life for a long time, he knew exactly how the game was worked.

"Who are you going to try with the swag?" Black Jim asked.

"Old Joe Jobstone," Smiler replied.

"He is a good man," Black Jim observed.

"Yes, that he is," Dutchy assented.

"The best man in New York—in fact the best that I know of in the country to handle a big matter like this," Smiler declared.

"You see he is a diamond-dealer, and does a large business in uncut stones; always has a lot on hand, you know, and when he gets these sparklers out of their settings and mixes them with the others it would puzzle all the fly cops in New York to pick out the stolen diamonds," the chief crook explained.

"Let me see! it is now three o'clock!" Smiler exclaimed, abruptly, consulting his watch. "How much longer will it take us to get up to the city?"

"If the wind holds, and I think it will, we ought to make the dock in a couple of hours," Black Jim answered.

"That will bring it to five o'clock," Smiler remarked in a reflective way.

"Now let me calculate how this thing is going to work in Long Branch," Smiler continued.

"The woman undoubtedly alarmed the house in fifteen or twenty minutes after we got off, then after the people were roused, they would probably talk the matter over for half an hour or so before they would send for the police."

"And at such an hour it wouldn't be an easy matter to get at the police," Black Jim observed.

"That is true, for the cops would be all snug in bed," Smiler assented.

"The men must be roused," he remarked, "and the chief hunted up before anything can be done, so I think it will be safe to calculate that it will be fully three o'clock, perhaps four, before the bloodhounds get fairly to work," the chief crook continued.

"Oh, yes, these country jays are mighty slow in getting waked up," Dutchy remarked.

"And the chances are that the chief of police will waste a lot of valuable time in endeavoring to find out where we have gone, set a watch on the depot, thinking that we will take a train, and so give him a chance to nab us."

The idea of the "jay policemen" watching the depot appeared so funny to the three that for a few minutes they indulged in hearty laughter.

"Then after the train pulls out and the cops can't get their clutches on any suspicious blokes, the jays will come to the conclusion that we have taken French leave by means of a team, and they will set to work to inquire on all the country roads."

And then again the three laughed loud and long.

"They will not be able to find any trace of us, of course, but the chances are great that it will take them until noon to make up their minds that we are too smart for them, and then they may be wise enough to notify the New York police," Smiler remarked.

"Ah, yes, but if they don't get the New York fly cops on the scent the first thing in the morning, they don't stand a ghost of a show of nabbing us!" Black Jim declared.

"That's right!" Smiler assented. "If the New York hawks don't nab us within a half an hour after we land, we are all right, for by that time the diamonds will be out of our hands."

"You can't get at old Jobstone too early to do business!" Dutchy asserted.

"Correct!" Smiler exclaimed. "If you should rouse the old bloke up in the middle of the night, he would not object in the least, provided you had a good bargain to offer him."

"He is a sharp, old file!" Black Jim exclaimed.

"Oh, yes, no mistake about that," Smiler replied. "Just look at the way he carries on business. As a rule the man who goes into the business of receiving stolen goods sets up as a pawnbroker, thinking that is the best cloak for the business; but then the pawnbroker is obliged to keep a book wherein the details of his loans must be set down, and if a man gets into any trouble, and the police go for the book, it is sometimes a hard matter for the suspected man to make everything appear all right."

"Now, old Jobstone does business in an entirely different way," Smiler explained. "He does not lend money on any article, but buys it outright; but he gives you his word to sell it back to you at any time within a year at a reasonable advance—enough, you know, to give him a fair profit."

"It is a cute dodge!" Black Jim remarked.

"Yes, and by carrying on his business in this way he is not obliged to keep a set of books, and if the police come down on him there are no troublesome things for him to explain, or he hasn't got to hunt up excuses for not putting certain transactions down, for a weak-kneed fellow will peach once in a while, and give everything away to the police."

"Ah, yes, little things of that sort will happen, and this is such a blamed uncertain world that a man never knows who to trust," Black Jim observed with the air of a philosopher.

"Old Joe will give as much for the sparklers as any one, and we are safe in doing business with him for he was never known to give a man away," Smiler declared.

"He goes on the motto that honesty is the best policy," Dutchy observed with a grin.

This brought the conversation to a close, for Black Jim advised his companions to "turn in" and catch "forty winks," as he did not need their aid in handling the boat, so they adopted his advice, without debate.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE FENCE.

THE wind held out all the night, as Black Jim had anticipated, and the sloop arrived at the dock only some twenty minutes later than the time which Jim had calculated upon.

The crooks made a landing on the Jersey shore at a pier some distance to the south from the Central Railway Ferry.

There were a number of yachts, and small crafts, anchored in the neighborhood, so this little sloop taking up its quarters with the rest did not excite any attention.

If the three had gone in the boat to a New York dock, somebody would have been after them for wharfage, and some unpleasant questions in regard to who they were, and where they had come from, might have been asked.

It was arranged that Dutchy should stay on board, and take care of the boat, while the other two sought the diamond-dealer with the plunder.

The pair crossed to the city by the railway ferry, and then took the L road train up-town.

The broker's place of business was on upper Broadway in the neighborhood of Thirtieth street.

He occupied a small store, and over it had his living apartments, therefore as all the upper part of the building, above the old diamond-dealer's quarters, was occupied by offices, there were plenty of people, the occupants and their visitors, passing up and down, so the crooks, who never went into the store but always called upon the old man in his private apartments, could come and go without being liable to excite attention.

The old man had one small room set apart for the reception of his crooked visitors, and as Smiler had often done business with the diamond-dealer he knew just how to get at him.

There was a little knob in the upper part of the door which communicated with a bell, and when this sounded, the diamond-dealer understood that a crooked customer wished to see him.

Smiler touched the bell.

"We will probably have to wait eight or ten minutes as it isn't likely that the old man is up, for I know he is a late bird," the crook leader remarked.

But the crook was wrong in his conjecture for within a minute a small, secret, sliding panel in the door opened and the face of the diamond-dealer appeared.

Joseph Jobstone was a man of sixty or thereabouts, but he was one of those men who did not show his age, looking far younger than he really was.

He had a smooth, round face, the chin fringed with a little, thin beard of bright brown, crispy curling hair like the scanty locks which ornamented his head.

The man had a smooth, oily way with him, and even a most excellent judge of character would not have suspected from his looks and conversation that he was as wily an old rascal as the great metropolis had ever

known.

He grinned in a good-natured way when he saw who it was.

By means of this secret panel the diamond-dealer could inspect the men who applied for admission, and if the scrutiny was not satisfactory he was not obliged to let them in.

"Aha, my dear Batheart is it you?" the old man exclaimed, greeting the crook as warmly as though he considered him to be the dearest friend he had in the world.

"Yes, and I came on business," the crook replied.

"Of course, I know that; I know that you are not a fellow who takes up the time of a busy man like myself just for the pleasure of saying how-to-do!" the old fellow exclaimed.

Then he closed the sliding panel, and in another moment the door was opened.

The old fellow ushered the two into the room with as much politeness as though they had been millionaires to whom he expected to sell a big bill of goods.

The apartment was a small one, and plainly furnished. The only odd thing about it was the door, which, although it was skillfully painted so that it looked like an ordinary door, yet was completely sheathed with iron, and had massive hinges and a lock which was more fitted for a bank portal than a door in a private residence.

If the old fellow had been questioned regarding this strange arrangement he would have grinned and explained that there were so many thieves about, and they were so skillful that a man in his line of business must take great precautions.

In reality, though, the iron-clad door was designed more to keep the police out than any thieves.

It was the wily old rascal's game to arrange matters so he could not be surprised by the police when engaged in buying some valuable stolen goods.

There was a square office table in the center of the room with arm-chairs around it.

"Sit down, my dear friends, and we will come to business at once," the old man said, seating himself at the table, and waving the others to seats on the opposite side.

"Get out your scales!" Smiler exclaimed. "My friends and I have got tired of our diamonds so we have come to the conclusion that we might as well sell them and take the cash."

"Oh, yes, men will get tired of that sort of thing," the diamond-dealer responded in

a business-like way, and without a sign to indicate that he knew the story was a falsehood.

"It is much better to have the cash than the stones, unless a man has so much money that he really does not know what to do with it," the old fellow continued.

And as he spoke he got out a pair of tiny scales, such as are used for weighing precious stones, from a drawer in the table.

Smiler had the jewels tied up in a handkerchief, and when he undid the knots and emptied the trinkets upon the table, the old diamond-dealer, despite his wonderful self-control, could not help uttering a little cry of amazement.

"Oh, my goodness gracious! you have a fine assortment here!" Jobstone cried.

"Yes, my family jewels!" the crook responded, with the air of an English lord.

"I had them in one of the safe deposit companies, you understand," Smiler continued. "I put them there so I could be sure they would not be stolen, but I have come to the conclusion that I might as well have the cash, and then I can invest it so that it will bring me in some money."

"Ah, yes, of course, quite wise," the old fellow remarked, nodding his head in a grave way, although from his knowledge of Smiler's character he felt almost certain that the gambling-dens of the metropolis would be the most likely place for the crook to "invest" his money.

"I suppose you want me to take the diamonds out of the settings so we can see what they weigh," Jobstone remarked, getting his tools out of the drawer as he spoke.

"Yes, of course, the settings are of no particular value, excepting for old gold; they are all so old-fashioned, you know," Smiler replied, in a careless way.

It was always the old diamond dealer's custom when engaged in a transaction of this kind to talk and act as if he was satisfied that it was all perfectly square and above-board, and if any crook was unwise enough to indicate that it was not all right, he immediately informed him that if there was anything wrong about the business he did not wish to be mixed up in the matter for he was an honest business man with a reputation to lose.

Of course after such a hint as that a man must be a dull fellow indeed if he did not moderate his utterances.

The old fellow went to work with the rapidity and skill of a man who had done a good deal of work in this line.

Out came the diamonds from their settings, the old man proceeding with the regularity of a machine until he came to the blue diamond, then he stopped, a puzzled look upon his fat face.

He had the diamond in his right hand and held it out at arm's length, watching the rays, of light coming from the gleaming stone, then he shook his head in a grave way.

The crooks watched him, rather surprised at this proceeding.

"That is a beauty, eh?" Smiler remarked. "One of the old mine stones, and diamonds of that peculiar kind are extremely rare; been in my family, you understand, a long time, and as it is a really remarkable stone it is worth a small fortune."

"Oh, yes, it is a very valuable stone," the old fellow replied in a peculiar, dry way, and then he placed the ring upon the table at one side of him, and went on with his work of removing the other jewels from their settings.

Soon he completed the task.

All the diamonds were put into the scales with the exception of the blue stone.

The crooks wondered at the oversight, for as a rule the old fellow was one who seldom made a mistake.

Smiler called his attention to the ring.

"There is a stone which you have not yet removed."

"Yes, I know it, but, my dear fellow, I don't think I care to buy that stone," old Jobstone replied.

"Ah, yes, I see," Smiler remarked in a reflective way.

"I presume you think that on account of its peculiar color it would not be a profitable stone for you to handle," the crook continued.

It was Smiler's idea that the old fellow was afraid to buy the blue diamond, because on

account of its being such a peculiar stone he feared it might be recognized by the police as being a stolen gem if he should endeavor to dispose of it.

"Yes, the color is against it certainly, but there isn't much doubt that I could find a market for it, for my operations are not confined to New York City alone, nor even to this country, for I have correspondents in some of the principal cities abroad, not only in Europe, but in both Asia and Africa."

"You cover all four quarters of the globe, in fact," Smiler remarked in a jesting way.

"Yes, that is really the truth, so it would not be a difficult matter to get rid of the stone, but there are certain reasons why I do not wish to have anything to do with it."

There was a strange look upon the old man's face as he spoke, and the crooks gazed at him in wonder.

"Well, governor it seems to me that this is very queer!" Smiler exclaimed.

"Yes, it is queer, and when you hear my explanation I fancy you will think that it is queerer still," the old diamond-dealer replied.

"Fire away!" Smiler exclaimed. "And I must say that this sort of a mysterious beginning of yours has greatly excited my curiosity."

"I don't wonder at it, for I am not the kind of man to allow a whim to interfere with business," Jobstone declared.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE DIAMOND-DEALER'S STORY.

"You would not take me to be a superstitious man, would you?" the old fellow asked, abruptly.

"No, I should not," Smiler replied, while Black Jim shook his head in an emphatic way.

"Well, as a rule I am not, but I will have to plead guilty to being a little superstitious in regard to this blue diamond."

The crooks stared at the diamond-dealer, and then at the diamond, for they did not know what to make of this strange affair.

"About twenty years ago I was in business in Calcutta, India," the old man explained. "I was in the same line as I am at present, although doing business in a small way. I had gone to India, from London, with an uncle who failed in a most disastrous way, and I was left almost penniless in a foreign country among strangers."

"Luckily I had done some business in the diamond line for one of the native princes, a man of high rank, and large wealth, and he, having taken a fancy to me, and being impressed with the belief that I was an extra good judge of precious stones, loaned me money enough to enable me to set up in business for myself in a small way."

"Well, now, I call a man of that kind a jolly good fellow!" Smiler exclaimed.

"He certainly gave me a lift at a time when I needed aid badly," the old man responded.

"I suppose you have heard of the great mutiny in India when the natives rose against the English, and were only put down after some terrible scenes of blood and slaughter?" the diamond-dealer asked.

"Oh, yes, I am an Englishman, you know, and of course know all about the mutiny," Smiler responded, while Black Jim contented himself with a nod and a wise look.

"The revolt had just been put down when I arrived in Calcutta, so business could go on. These Asiatic rulers, the rajahs and begums, were great fellows for all kinds of precious stones, you know."

"Oh, yes, I have always heard that the big game went in for all that sort of thing," Smiler observed. "And I have heard some tough yarns, too, about how private soldiers managed to get hold of lots of treasures when the English troops captured a town where one of the rajahs was making a last desperate stand." the crook continued. "Common soldiers, you know, getting away with diamonds and rubies and emeralds and all sorts of precious stones, some of them worth a mint of money."

"There is a deal of truth in some of the yarns, as you call them," old Jobstone declared.

"And it was owing to the fact that a lot of people, who knew very little in regard to the value of precious stones, but had contrived to get some in their possession, that I was able to do quite a thriving business," the diamond-dealer explained.

"In those days, my dear boys, being a younger man, and anxious to get along in the world, I took risks that I would not dream of doing now."

"Yes, I suppose things were quite unsettled at the close of the mutiny," Smiler observed.

"Very true. When the native princes, who had taken such an active part in fighting the English that they knew they could not expect much mercy, saw that they could not possibly hold out, and that the end was rapidly approaching, they tried to escape the vengeance of the English Government by flight, they carried what treasures they could with them and the rest they buried."

"Yes, yes, and I have heard a hundred yarns about men finding these buried treasures!" Smiler exclaimed.

"Of course the confidential and trusted servants of the fugitive rulers were the men who assisted in hiding away the treasures, and although as a rule these fellows were faithful to their lords, yet if any of the rajahs were killed in the fight, or captured and executed by the English, or wandered away so that no one knew what had become of them, it was only natural that the men who knew where the treasures were hid should help themselves to the valuables."

"Certainly! and jolly big fools they would have been if they hadn't collared the swag when it was to be had without even having to take the trouble of asking for it!" Smiler exclaimed.

"And owing to these circumstances when a man came to me after nightfall and offered to sell me valuable jewels I did not take the trouble to question him in regard to how he became possessed of them," the old diamond-dealer explained with a cunning smile.

"Of course not!" the chief crook exclaimed. "You would be jolly green to bother yourself with a lot of questions under such circumstances!"

"As I said though I ran some risks, but my profits were large enough to warrant me in taking them."

"One night an old fat rascal of a Hindoo from whom I had bought a half a dozen articles came to see me and announced with a great deal of mystery that he had brought for my inspection one of the finest diamonds that had ever been seen in India, and then he produced this blue stone."

"It is a beauty and no mistake!" Smiler declared gazing at the stone with a critical eye.

"I felt sure I could find a purchaser for the ring the moment I saw what an odd, peculiar yet beautiful diamond it was."

"My patron, the rajah, was always on the look-out for rare and beautiful stones, but anticipating that I would have trouble in driving a bargain, for the old Hindoo was a good judge of the value of stones, I only offered him just one-half of what I expected to give."

"So as to give a chance for a little bit of Jew business, eh?" Smiler remarked, with a knowing wink.

"To my surprise he accepted my offer on condition that I would close the bargain at once and pay over the money."

"Aha! the beggar was anxious to get the sparkler off his hands!" the crook leader exclaimed, following the story with a deal of interest.

"But I say, I should think you would have smelt a mouse when the man was so anxious to get rid of the stone."

"I did at first, but he told a plausible story about how he had got on the track of a buried treasure, which, if he could secure it, would make him rich for life, but the men who would give him the information were going away that night, and if he did not have the ready cash to pay right down he could not get the secret from them," the diamond-dealer explained.

"Well he gave you a good lay-out, and no mistake!" Smiler exclaimed.

"I concluded to risk the venture; you see the prospect of making a small fortune at a single turn dazzled me, and I forgot my

usual prudence," the old fellow remarked with a weighty shake of the head.

"The smartest of us are caught that way sometimes," Smiler observed.

"As you said, the prospect of making big money by the turn of one's hand, as you might say, often affects the head of an extra wise and cunning duffer," the crook continued.

"I gave the man the money and took the diamond," the old man related.

"A half-an-hour later, my patron, the rajah, paid me a visit, and I hastened to show him the prize which I had gained."

"But he knew the diamond the moment his eyes fell upon it, his face grew black as night and he cried; 'What! I buy that accursed stone? Englishman, I would not take it if you would give it to me, and throw in the weight of a king's ransom beside!'"

"The old bloke was emphatic, and he didn't hesitate to express his feelings either," Smiler remarked.

"I was amazed and asked for an explanation, then he told me the story of the blue diamond."

"There were two of the blue diamonds originally, and they had been the eyes of a golden god. In a war between two claimants to a kingdom one of the men stole the diamonds from the god in order to raise money."

"Aha! now that is what I call a stroke of genius!" Smiler exclaimed. "What was the good of the diamond eyes to the blooming idol when a man could get good solid cash for them?"

"Well, as affairs turned out it seemed to be the most unfortunate thing that he could have done, for after he robbed the golden god everything went wrong with him, and finally he died a miserable death," the old man remarked, in a solemn way.

"And all because he took the blue diamonds, eh?" the crook remarked, in a jeering tone.

"So everybody believed," Jobstone replied.

"Aha! that is all bosh, and I don't believe a word of it!" Smiler declared, stoutly.

"What do you say, Blacky?" he asked.

"Oh, no!" Black Jim declared, shaking his head in a very decided way. "The yarn is too tough entirely, and we can't go it."

"From the possession of the dead rajah the diamonds passed into other hands, but ill-luck came to all who had the stones, generally death attended by violence," the old fellow remarked, in a solemn way.

"Then came the mutiny, and during the scenes of war the diamonds disappeared, and no man knew what had become of them, but this stone which I bought to sell to the rajah, was one of the eyes of the golden god he was sure."

"And he wouldn't buy it?" Smiler exclaimed, thrusting his tongue into his cheek, meaning by the action to express decided incredulity.

"No, he would not, and he took pains to warn me that if I valued my life I ought to get rid of the ill-omened jewel as soon as possible."

"Oh, I s'pose you chucked it out of doors, eh?" Smiler exclaimed, in a very sarcastic way.

"No, unfortunately I did not, for I was incredulous, as you are, and I could not bring myself to believe that a little simple stone although it was of great value, could possibly bring either good or bad luck," the old man replied.

"It is utterly ridiculous!" Smiler declared.

"The toughest yarn that I ever heard in all my born days!" Black Jim added.

"My experience is that there is a deal of truth in the superstition," the old fellow said.

"But I did not think so then. I put the diamond away in my safe after my patron departed, then when my usual bedtime came I retired to rest."

"In the middle of the night I was roused from my slumber by rude hands."

"Robbers had invaded my house, and I was in the power of a merciless lot of Hindoo thieves."

"Well, well, that was a surprise party!" Smiler exclaimed.

"I never had any experience of the rascals before but I knew them well enough by reputation, and understood that they would not hesitate to take my life on the instant if I refused to comply with their commands,

so when they requested me to open the safe I did so."

"It was Hobson's choice!" the chief crook exclaimed.

"They took all my valuables, and then, although they had promised that if I opened the safe they would not harm me, yet as soon as the plunder was in their possession they struck me down with their knives and left me for dead on the floor."

"Say, that wasn't a square deal!" Smiler cried. "And such rascals as that ought to be hunted down and killed like so many dogs!"

"And so they were, for after leaving my house they went to the jungle where they quarreled over the division of the plunder," the old man related.

"The chief of the band insisted upon taking the blue diamond, although the rest thought that it ought to be sold and the money divided, and one of the gang was so incensed by the high-handed action of the chief that he turned traitor and betrayed his fellows."

"Well, honestly now, I will have to admit that it does look as if the blue diamond does not bring particularly good-luck to the men who get hold of it," Smiler remarked.

"But it is all bosh though for all that," he added.

"It is a blamed lot of superstition and there isn't a bit of truth in it!" he continued in a dogged way.

"The traitor led the English troops to the haunt of the robbers, a ruined temple in the midst of a dense jungle, and the troopers contrived to completely surprise the rascals."

"Good!" the chief crook exclaimed. "I don't pretend to be an extra good man, but I don't have any sympathy with these miserable Hindoo thieves who ain't anything but a lot of savages."

"The villains knew that they fought with ropes around their necks; death was their portion if taken prisoners, so they made so desperate a resistance that the English were compelled to kill them without mercy."

"Served 'em right, the tawny scoundrels!" Smiler exclaimed.

"And after the slaughter the traitor searched for the blue diamond, but he could not find it," the old man explained.

"I will be hanged if the yarn isn't an interesting one, even if it isn't true!" Black Jim declared.

"Oh, yes, it is a good story, I will admit it, but that is all there is to it," Smiler replied.

"These Hindoo thieves are noted for their shrewdness, and the traitor guessed what became of the diamond," the old man continued.

"When the chief saw that escape was impossible, and he must take his choice between death and falling into the hands of the foes who he knew would take his life as soon as he could be tried and condemned, he determined to die rather than surrender, and resolved that the precious jewel, the real cause of the calamity, should not fall into the hands of the soldiers, so he swallowed it."

The crooks uttered a cry of amazement.

"Well, of all the dodges that I ever heard of this is about the queerest!" Smiler exclaimed.

"He was a gilt-edged, luxurious cuss to want to feed on diamonds," Black Jim observed with a grin.

"The sole survivor of the band was up to this trick, and so after the dead men were buried he waited until a dark night came and then with the assistance of another rascal dug up the body of the dead chief, cut him open and, sure enough, found the diamond."

"Well, well, this beats all that ever I heard of!" Smiler exclaimed.

"Just like a play at the theatre!" Black Jim remarked.

"Now observe: the rascals got possession of the unlucky stone in this way, then they sought their hiding-place in a low quarter of the town, and celebrated their victory with deep draughts of rice brandy," the diamond-dealer related.

"The liquor got into their heads, they quarreled, drew their knives and set out to do their best to kill each other."

"Blamed if it ain't queer!" Smiler in-

terjected, shaking his head in a thoughtful way.

"It kinder makes a man put on his thinking cap," Black Jim asserted.

"Both of the men were so badly hurt that they died of the wounds," the old man continued.

"Two more deaths you will observe directly chargeable to the blue diamond," Jobstone added.

"The sparkler certainly was pretty well mixed up in it," Smiler admitted.

"So the blue diamond fell into the hands of the authorities, and one of the men, before he died, related how it happened to be in their possession.

"On the very next day after the diamond came into the possession of the authorities it mysteriously disappeared; some one stole it, but who did the job, or how it was done, no one ever discovered."

"And that is the end of the blue diamond story, eh?" Smiler asked.

"And you don't know how the stone got from the Old World to the New?"

"No, I do not."

"Mebbe it ain't the same one," Black Jim suggested, looking with longing eyes at the brilliant stone.

"Oh, yes, it is, I am too good a judge of diamonds to make any mistake about the matter," the old man asserted.

"And you will not take it?" Smiler asked.

"Not as a gift!"

"Well, we ain't superstitious, and we will risk the keeping of it," the chief crook declared.

Then the three made a bargain in regard to the rest of the plunder, the old fellow paid over the money, and the crooks departed.

"We have made a good haul!" Smiler declared. "But we ought to have got a thousand more for this blue diamond. The old fellow wouldn't have it, though!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE CROOKS DELIBERATE.

The pair took the Elevated Road to the ferry, then changed to the Central Railway boat.

Both felt highly delighted at the successful deal with the old diamond man, but neither one referred to the matter on the train, for the car was well filled with people, and long experience had taught this brace of rascals that a detective may be encountered at any moment.

But after they got on board the ferry-boat, as there were only a few passengers, and none within earshot, they thought they might indulge in a little conversation.

"I tell you what it is, Jim, this here is about as good a game as we have struck in a dog's age!" Smiler exclaimed, exultingly.

"Oh, yes, we have no cause to complain; but what a queer notion the old bloke had about the blue diamond," his companion remarked.

"You bet! I think that is about the biggest piece of nonsense that I ever heard of, and I am astonished that a sharp old file like Jobstone should be weak-minded enough to take any stock in such a ridiculous yarn."

"I thought it was a little bit of monkey business on his part to get us to sell him the diamond at a low figure."

"So did I, but he was honest about the matter, and evidently didn't want the sparkler at any price."

"It is a mighty queer lay-out and no mistake!" Black Jim observed. "But I say, Smiler, what will we do with the stone?"

"Well, I don't exactly know," the other responded in a thoughtful way.

"One thing is certain, and that is we must get rid of the diamond, for it will not be safe for us to carry it around," he continued.

"Yes, you are right about that, for if any of the fly cops should take it into their heads to arrest us on suspicion, and we should be searched, the discovery of the stone would show right away just what kind of a game we had been playing."

"We must get rid of the diamond somehow, and as this little job will be apt to kick up a precious row I rather think it will be advisable for us to emigrate for a while."

"Yes, that would be a good move, I suppose," the other responded.

"The woman took the thing mighty easily for she knew we had her foul, and she was afraid that we would kill her if she attempted to kick up any row," Smiler remarked.

"Oh, you can bet your sweet life that she knew we meant business!"

"Exactly, and she didn't dare to kick, but you are safe in betting all that you are worth, or ever expect to be worth, that she will make a fearful howl about it to-day."

"No doubt about it."

"Them stage women are always anxious to get their names in the newspapers, and you can bet high that she will do her best to have this little affair published far and wide."

"She is just the kind of hairpin to offer a big reward—a thousand or two of dollars, maybe—so as to make a big row in the newspapers," Smiler continued.

"Yes, and if she does play any game of that sort there will not be a fly cop in the city but will do his best to collar the boodle."

"Oh, yes, under such circumstances they will go in to do their level best, and that is why I think it will be wise for us to emigrate for a while."

"Where will we go?"

"Take a trip to the south'ard, skirt along the coast down into the Chesapeake Bay region," Smiler answered. "Make out that we are a party of city sports out for a vacation trip."

"That is a bully idea!" the other exclaimed.

"It isn't bad," Smiler replied. "The fly cops will not be apt to get onto our game, and if we remain away for a month or two the odds are big that the fuss will be all over by that time and then we can return."

"Yes, that seems to me to be correct," Black Jim remarked in a reflective way.

"In a couple of months some new thing will turn up, and the bloodhounds will start off on a new scent and forget all about this business," the swarthy crook continued.

"That is about the size of it," Smiler declared.

"The detectives are for all the world like a pack of dogs. First they run like mad in one direction, then something happens to attract their attention and, helter-skelter, off they go on an entirely new course."

"That is right—figured down to a dot," Black Jim exclaimed.

"Now that we have turned the swag into cash the quicker we are off the better," Smiler observed.

"I have got provisions enough on board to last for a couple of days, and then we can run into some little town on the coast and get a fresh supply."

"Two days, you know, will take us well out of reach of these New York fly cops."

"Oh, yes."

"But if we stay round here, and as big a row is kicked up about the affair as I think there will be, some one of the sneaks might get onto us, for we are pretty well-known to these detectives, and just as soon as the men up in Mulberry street learn all the particulars of the game they will be looking around to see what coves are in town who would be able to work a first-class job of this kind."

"You are right, and we would be very stupid not to get out as soon as possible," Black Jim assented.

The arrival of the boat at its slip on the Jersey shore put an end to the conversation.

The pair proceeded directly to their boat, which was about a mile from the ferry landing.

And as they walked on they chatted gleefully together, for both were in unusually high spirits.

The pair had led crooked lives for years and during that time had done many a good stroke of business, but never had they succeeded in getting hold of so much money with so little trouble in their lives.

In due time they reached the little dock where they had landed.

Their sloop was anchored about five hundred feet off-shore.

Dutchy was on the watch for the coming of his partners and put off in the small boat, which went with the sloop, as soon as they came in sight.

"We have done the trick all right!" Smiler declared as the boat came up alongside of the dock.

"All O. K., eh?" Dutchy asked, as the pair got on board.

"You bet your sweet life on it!" Black Jim replied.

"That is good!" Dutchy remarked. "And I must say that you have been mighty quick about it. I was afraid, when I saw you coming, that you had not been able to do anything, for you haven't been gone long."

"When I go in to do business, I always go on the jump!" Smiler declared in a boasting way.

"And you have got the cash?" Dutchy asked.

"As right as nine-pence!" Smiler answered.

"That is good!" Dutchy exclaimed.

Then Smiler explained the plan of operations which he had formed, and Dutchy agreed that it would be wise to get out of the way as soon as possible.

"I know how the thing will work just as well as though I was on the ground," Smiler asserted. "The woman will notify the Long Branch cops, and the country Jakes will go to work to turn the town upside down."

"Oh, yes, those fellows always make a deal of a row, even if they don't do any work," Black Jim remarked.

"They will go in to hunt for traces of the men who did the work," Smiler observed with a chuckle.

"And much good it will do them!" Dutchy declared, with a grin.

"They will have to give up clean beat, of course, and then the woman will give the case to the New York cops," Smiler said.

"Maybe if she is uncommon fly, and about all these actresses are, she will not wait to see what the country cops will do, but will give the case to the New Yorkers at once," the crook leader continued in a thoughtful way.

"If she does go on that lay, and to my thinking the chances are big that she will be smart enough to try a game of that kind, we can't get away from New York too quickly!" Black Jim declared.

"That is my opinion to a hair!" Dutchy exclaimed.

"Yes, you are right, boys, the sooner we skip now, the better!" Smiler assented.

CHAPTER XXIV.

A SURPRISE.

As the chief crook finished the small boat came up alongside of the sloop. Then the three clambered on board and hoisted the boat to the deck after them.

"Now then, boys, as it will not take us five minutes to get under way I propose that we go down in the cabin and divide the swag, so that in case of any accident each man would have his own share," Smiler suggested.

This meeting with decided approval, the trio went into the little cabin and there the chief of the gang divided the money in equal parts, which was pocketed by the rogues in the most gleeful manner.

"Now, there's a diamond ring which I couldn't sell," Smiler explained. "It is a peculiar, odd sparkler—a blue diamond, and the old rascal of a fence pretended that he knew all about it, said it was an unlucky stone, and he wouldn't take it at any price."

"An unlucky stone?" exclaimed Dutchy in wonder.

"Yes, he told a ghost story about the diamond bringing bad luck to whoever got hold of it."

"Why, that is about the toughest yarn that I ever heard!" Dutchy declared.

"Yes, it is the toughest old tale that I ever struck, but the old rascal evidently believed there was something in it, for he wouldn't touch the diamond at any price, and it is a big wonder, too, for it is a beauty, as you can see for yourself," and as he spoke Smiler held the ring up.

"It is a beauty and no mistake!" Dutchy declared.

Then to the ears of the three came the noise of a boat grating against the side of the sloop, followed by the sound of men clambering on board.

"Hello! what does that mean?" Smiler exclaimed in alarm, as he shoved the ring into his pocket and hastened to the companion-way.

As he opened the double doors and stuck out his head he was greeted by the unwel-

come sight of two of the cutest detectives in New York—Joe Phenix and Barney McGlin.

Phenix was in advance, and, as Smiler's head appeared, the detective leveled a revolver at him while McGlin dangled a pair of handcuffs.

"Come out and let me present you with a pair of bracelets!" was the detective's greeting.

Smiler and the detective were old acquaintances, and it was not the first time Joe Phenix had asked the crook to hold out his hands.

For a moment Smiler glared in sullen rage at the bloodhound; then recovering his composure with a violent effort, he exclaimed:

"What in blazes do you mean?"

"Just exactly what I said!" the detective promptly assured. "Come right out of your hole and let me snap the 'darbies' on you!"

"I hav'n't been doing anything!" Smiler protested sulkily, his vicious eyes flashing like a serpent's.

"Oh, haven't you? Come out, I say, and don't be unwise enough to try any of your little games, Smiler," the detective warned.

"I haven't done anything, and this is a blamed outrage!" Smiler again protested, as, with the air of a martyr he came out of the cabin.

"Don't waste your breath in idle talk!" the detective rejoined. "You're in for it, this time."

Then McGlin snapped the handcuffs on the crook's wrists.

"Now then, Black Jim and Dutchy, get a move on you!" the man-hunter called out. "Come, right up and get on the bracelets!"

The pair obeyed—obeyed because they knew not what else to do, but if looks could kill both the detectives would have been dead men.

"You ain't got no right to play a game of this kind on us!" Black Jim exclaimed, angrily. "What is the charge, anyway?"

"Well, in this case we are going on general principles, so to speak," Phenix replied.

"Barney and I happened to be in the office of the ferry when you and your pal came along, and there was a peculiar air of exultation about you two which gave us the impression that you have been successful in making a good haul somewhere, and so we determined to 'pipe' you off."

"Well, it is a blamed outrage!" the helpless Smiler asseverated.

He was satisfied that the detective told the truth, and that it was by pure accident alone that the man-hunters had stumbled upon them.

And it would be all right, even now, if it wasn't for that infernal unlucky blue diamond, as Smiler mentally characterized the brilliant. Then a bright idea came to the crook. He would not be searched until he was placed in jail, and if he watched his opportunities well he might be able to get rid of the fateful ring while on the road to the prison.

A boat must be used to convey them to the shore, and during the transfer, even though he was handcuffed, he ought to be able to slip his hand into his side-pocket, get hold of the ring and drop it overboard.

Once at the bottom of the river, the stone of misfortune would exert its baleful influence over no possessor again.

Smiler gloated over the idea.

No thought of the value of the diamond was now in his mind; all that he cared for was to get rid of the jewel as soon as possible.

"Yes, sir, it is a blamed outrage!" the chief of the gang repeated. "Because a man has had the misfortune to get into trouble once it does not follow that he is going to be crooked all his life."

"That is very true," Phenix replied.

"And I will say that, if I thought you were on the square now, I would not have troubled you, but you know, old fellow, you have been a crook for years, and it is hard work for old dogs to learn new tricks."

"But, if you haven't been up to any mischief the superintendent will not hold you," the detective continued. "It is my duty, though, to take you before him so an examination can be made, so if you are wise you will go along without any kicking."

"That is all right!" Smiler declared with an air of bravado. "I know that I haven't done anything, so I am not at all afraid of an examination, but it is a blamed shame that a man can't go along quietly attending to his own business without being hauled before a police court just as if he was caught doing a piece of crooked work."

"It is persecution!" Black Jim added.

"You bet your sweet life it is!" Dutchy echoed.

"You are wasting your breath in talking this way!" the detective replied. "You might go ahead on this lay with some reason if you were fellows who had only been in trouble once or twice, but for old crooks like yourselves to talk about persecution is simply ridiculous."

"I don't believe either one of you three has done a full month's honest work in the last five years!" McGlin declared, for the first time joining in the conversation.

McGlin was a silent, reserved fellow who seldom did much talking.

The three crooks gave vent to exclamations of disgust at this unpleasant reference to their past careers.

"That isn't so!" Smiler asserted. "You fellows in the fly cop line always go in to make things as black for a man as you can. But, say, are you going to march us all the way to Headquarters with these ornaments on our wrists?"

"Do you object?" Phenix questioned.

"Yes, I do!" Smiler retorted, angrily. "I don't want to be made a show of, particularly when there isn't any reason for it."

"You ought to have the sand to take a hack," Black Jim suggested.

"Well, I don't mind taking a coach; anything in reason," Phenix responded. "But, we will not be able to get one until we reach the ferry."

"That is all right," Smiler assented. "I don't mind these Jersey men but I will be hanged if I want to go through New York with the darbies on my wrists."

"Why not sail the boat right over to New York and land at one of the upper docks, round Houston street somewhere, and then we can take a coach direct to Headquarters?" Black Jim asked.

The detective, reflecting upon the matter, came to the conclusion that the idea was a good one.

Both the man-hunters understood how to handle the craft so they knew they would not be obliged to call upon the crooks for assistance.

"Is there wind enough?" Phenix asked with a searching glance at the sky.

"Oh, yes, plenty!" Black Jim replied. "And we ought to be able to run over in an hour easily enough."

"We will do it, eh, McGlin?" Phenix asked.

"Yes, it will be the best way."

Then the detectives proceeded to get the sails up, and in a few minutes the boat was speeding toward the New York shore.

The wind was a favorable one, and for the first half-hour the little craft went on at a good rate of speed, but the wind is a most uncertain thing, as every boatman has found to his cost, and by the time that the boat had got half to its destination the breeze almost died away, so that the sloop did but little more than drift along.

The detectives were disgusted.

The only thing they could do under the circumstances was to get out the sweeps, as the long oars are called, and propel the boat along by their aid.

This is a slow process, and it was a good three hours before the little craft reached the dock to which she was bound.

During the sail Smiler took advantage of the first opportunity to get rid of the blue diamond, which he was afraid had brought upon him this misfortune.

He waited until the detectives were busy with the boat, taking care that neither one of them had their eyes on him, and then slipped his hand into the pocket where he had placed the ring, but, to his amazement, the jewel was not there.

All he had in his pocket was a small coin wallet, so that if the diamond had been there he would have found it at once.

"Well, I will be hanged if this don't beat all!" he muttered to himself.

"I must have made a mistake and instead

of putting it in my pocket dropped it," he continued.

"But it does not seem possible to me that I could have made a blunder of that kind."

The crook was very much puzzled by this strange circumstance, for he could not imagine where the ring had gone.

"Well, there is one consolation," he murmured. "If the sparkler has disappeared the fly cops will not be able to enjoy the satisfaction of finding the diamond in my possession."

CHAPTER XXV.

AT HEADQUARTERS.

AFTER reaching the dock there was another delay, for it was a good half an hour before a hack could be got.

The detectives were in no particular hurry though, and as they had arrested the three merely on suspicion they shrunk from parading them through the streets of the metropolis with fetters on their wrists.

True it was their firm belief that the three were as tough rascals as could be found in the city, yet as they hadn't any evidence against them, they were disposed to act as though they thought the three might have turned over a new leaf and were now endeavoring to lead honest lives.

As a rule the human bloodhound is inclined to be merciful to the man whom he hunts with such untiring energy the moment he becomes satisfied that the crook has repented of his evil ways and is disposed to act on the square.

After reaching Headquarters the veteran detective had the prisoners conveyed into the presence of the superintendent.

When the report of the capture was made to the chief he commended the action.

"In the case of three well-known crooks of this kind it is always advisable to place them under arrest if there is anything at all suspicious about their actions, and in this case, from the fact that they had the boat, there is hardly a doubt that the rascals were up to some mischief."

"That was my idea, and so I put the collar on them," Phenix observed, for it was he who made the report.

"Let the men be carefully searched," the inspector commanded. Detective Mack, he said to one of his men, "you attend to the matter. As soon as the operation is completed bring the men in with whatever articles you may find on their persons," the inspector ordered.

"All right, sir," the detective answered, and then immediately departed.

The crooks did not like the searching business, but as they knew that nothing which they might say would have any effect they submitted with as good a grace as possible.

The detectives were amazed at the large amount of money which the men possessed, and Mack could not forbear exclaiming:

"Well, well, you fellows must have cracked a mighty rich crib lately to collar all this boodle!"

"Nary crib!" Smiler declared defiantly. "We won the money betting on a lead-pipe cinch in the Guttenburg races—a thirty to one horse and we pulled off a big pot of money; we can do it again too, for we have got a friend who is in the ring and he is able to put us onto these air-tight cinches."

"Gammon!" cried Mack, "I don't take any stock in that yarn."

"Hello! what is this?" the detective cried, abruptly.

The crooks had been compelled to strip after their pockets had been thoroughly searched, and the detective's exclamation had been caused by the discovery of the diamond ring which had fallen through a hole in Batheart's pocket, slipped down the legs of his pantaloons and lodged in the top of his shoe, where the detective's sharp eyes discovered it.

"Well, curse me if I ever saw such a piece of luck as that!" Smiler muttered under his breath, as the two detectives, together with a couple of other officers, who were assisting in the searching operation, bent their eyes admiringly upon the diamond.

"You must have been playing in big luck, Smiler, to get hold of such a magnificent sparkler as this beauty!" Mack declared.

"Did you win this on an air-tight cinch at Guttenburg too?" the detective added in a sarcastic manner.

"No, I didn't!" Smiler retorted. "I never saw the thing before, and don't know anything about it."

The crook realized that he was in for it, and so took refuge in a bold denial.

Under the circumstances it was all he could do. He was thoroughly enraged, though, by the unfortunate occurrence, and now was quite prepared to admit that the old diamond-dealer was right in refusing to have anything to do with the stone, fated to bring evil to whoever possessed it.

And as the angry crook glared in sullen rage at the beautiful jewel it seemed to him as though it sparkled with a baleful light, just as the eyes of a malicious demon would gleam.

"I fancy, Smiler, that you made a big mistake in holding onto this ring, for it will be apt to give us a clue to the little game which you have been playing," Detective Mack observed.

"Ah, you are on the wrong tack altogether!" the crook retorted, sullenly.

"I don't know anything about the ring, and I am giving it to you straight when I say that I never saw it before."

"You chose a mighty unsafe place to hide it, and it is a wonder that you did not lose it on the way," McGlin observed.

One of the other officers had been making a careful examination of the pantaloons which the crooks had doffed, going on the idea that there might be some valuables concealed in the hems, and at this point he made the discovery of the hole in Smiler's pocket.

He announced the fact, and the officers immediately guessed how the ring came to be in the shoe.

No other discoveries were made, so the crooks resumed their clothes, and then were ushered into the presence of the superintendent, who was busy with Joe Phenix in looking over the list of valuables which had been stolen from the actress's cottage.

Detective Mack reported the particulars of the search, placing the money and the blue diamond on the superintendent's desk.

Both the chief and Joe Phenix recognized the blue diamond as soon as their eyes fell upon the ring.

The pair exchanged glances.

"Well, Smiler, we have got you dead to rights again," the chief remarked, speaking as though he knew just what tricks the crooks had been committing.

"Oh, no, I don't think you have got me in a hole at all," the crook replied, assuming a confidence which he was far from feeling.

"Yes, I have, and the quicker you make a clean breast of the matter the better it will be for you," Mack retorted.

"Oh, of course, that is the old game!" Smiler exclaimed, with a sneer.

"That is the way you fly cops always try to work the trick," the crook continued. "Your best holt is brag and bluster, but you can't play me for a flat, no way you can fix it."

"When a man is caught dead to rights what is the use of his trying to pretend that he has not done the trick?" Mack asked.

"Yes, but you have not got me in any fix of that kind," Smiler retorted, defiantly. "And if you think you can prove anything against me you are welcome to go ahead and do it!"

The officers were satisfied from the large sum of money found upon the prisoners that they had been concerned in a successful robbery, and they wondered too that the crook had been unwise enough to retain the diamond ring, for as it was a peculiar stone it could be easily identified.

After the three resumed their garments they were conducted into the presence of the chief of police.

The superintendent was still conversing with Joe Phenix, who was seated by the side of the officer, behind the chief's desk.

Detective Mack made his report and placed before the chief the moneys taken from the prisoners, also the diamond ring.

There was a sparkle in the eyes of the chief as soon as he caught sight of the diamond, and the crooks, who were watching his face narrowly, drew an unfavorable omen from the fact, and all three, in their minds, bitterly cursed the ill luck which had caused them to retain the ring.

The list of the stolen jewels which Joe

Phenix had brought to the chief was lying before him on the desk, and the moment the ring came into his hands it took but a single glance for him to ascertain that the diamond ring exactly corresponded with the description of the one stolen from the burlesque actress.

Of course, under these circumstances, it was not strange that the chief should be able to make an accurate guess in regard to the game which the crooks had been playing.

"Well, well, Smiler, you and your pals succeeded in making a big haul this time, and no mistake!" the superintendent declared.

"You are too much for me," Smiler declared with a shake of the head, and affecting an air of ignorance. "I don't know what you are driving at."

"But what on earth made you hold on to this sparkler?" the official exclaimed.

"I know it is a beautiful stone, and any man might be proud to wear it, but for a fellow in your position, considering how the stone came into your possession, it was an awful risky thing to retain it," the chief continued.

"It was your game, you know, to get rid of a tell-tale thing of this kind as soon as possible," he added.

"All this is just like so much Greek to me!" Smiler declared in a dogged way. "I don't know what you are talking about."

"Oh, yes, you do!" And the superintendent laid back in his chair and laughed in the face of the discomfited crook.

"It was a great game you put up, Smiler, there is no discount on it," the official remarked in a patronizing way.

"And if you had not been foolish enough to hold on to this blue diamond it would have been almost an impossibility for anybody to have brought the affair home to you."

"You are too much for me, boss!" Smiler declared.

"Oh, no, you know well enough what I mean!" the official replied.

"You went in on the sloop game this time," the chief continued. "And you selected Long Branch for your field of operations."

Despite their strong powers of self-control, an anxious look appeared on the faces of the crooks as they listened to the words of the police superintendent.

"You did the trick splendidly, there is no mistake about that, and you managed to get away with as rich a boodle as has been collared by any gang in this neighborhood for a year or more," the chief remarked.

"And the quickness with which you turned the jewelry into cash is really wonderful," the superintendent added.

"It was just by sheer accident too that these gentlemen happened to nail you," the official went on.

"It is rather risky business arresting men on bare suspicion, and if you three had not been such well-known crooks the detectives would not have dared to do it, but in this case it was fortunate that they did so, for otherwise I don't doubt that you would have given us a good deal of trouble; undoubtedly we would have had considerable difficulty in bringing you to book. As it is though we have got you hard and fast."

"You are making a good deal of talk about nothing, I think!" Smiler exclaimed, defiantly.

"What is the charge against us, anyhow?" he continued.

"Housebreaking," the chief replied.

"You can't prove it!" Smiler cried.

"Oh, yes we can, thanks to this blue diamond!" the official responded, regarding the jewel with a smile as he held it up so the light could play upon it.

Under their breath the three crooks cursed the unlucky stone in the bitterest manner.

Most surely, whether there was any truth in the tale of the blue diamond or not, the possession of the stone had proved to be a most unfortunate thing for them.

"You three broke into the house of Miss Ragsdale, the burlesque actress, at Long Branch last night—or early this morning, to speak by the card—surprised the lady in her room and made her open her safe so that you could help yourself to all her valuables in the jewelry line," the official declared, mak-

ing the statement with the confidence of a man who was certain in regard to the truth of what he said.

"Two of you did the trick while the third man kept watch outside."

"Then, after the boodle was gathered you made your escape by means of the sloop on the river, thus completely baffling the local police."

"Oh, yes, this is a mighty nice yarn, but it is my belief that you will have a deal of difficulty in proving there is any truth in it!" Smiler declared, doggedly.

"Oh, no, I have got you foul and if you are wise you will make a clean breast of it, and so save trouble," the official replied.

"It will make the punishment lighter, you know," the superintendent added in a persuasive way.

"We haven't been convicted yet, have we?" the chief crook asked, in an insolent tone.

He was burning with rage at having been so easily trapped, and therefore was disposed to be ugly.

"Come now, don't be saucy!" the superintendent exclaimed, sharply, "for it will not do you any good."

"You know well enough that you have got to be tried before you can be convicted," the official continued.

"But you ought to have sense enough to know that from the long experience I have had in this sort of thing I ought to be a pretty good judge in regard to the chance a man stands."

"Oh, yes, I suppose so," Smiler admitted in a sullen way.

"Now, then, let me show you just how strong the proof is against you," the chief remarked.

"You did the trick by means of the sloop, which carried you to the ground and away from it, and all three of you were captured on the sloop," the official continued.

"Now the next point is to bring forward proof that this particular craft was in the neighborhood of the place where the robbery was committed."

"Ah, and that will not be an easy matter!" Smiler exclaimed.

"If you believe that you will believe almost anything!" the superintendent retorted.

"Just consider for a moment the peculiar class of people who live in the neighborhood of Long Branch—the Seabright fishermen, fellows who can tell a strange sail as far as they can see it, and do you really think that none of these old salts noticed your boat, to say nothing of the clammers who in their little crafts are always hard at work in the lower bay?"

The under jaws of the crooks dropped, for none of them had taken this fact into consideration.

"Why, man, the chances are good that there are fully a dozen men who will be able to bear witness to the fact that your sloop was in the neighborhood of Long Branch yesterday!" the chief declared.

"That is one point, and shows that you were in the neighborhood of the house where the robbery was committed, and then the fact that this diamond ring was found on your person, one of the jewels stolen from Miss Ragsdale, and as it is such a peculiar stone—I never saw anything at all resembling it and I have seen a vast quantity of diamonds in my time—there will not be the least difficulty in proving to the satisfaction of a jury that this particular ring was the one stolen from the actress."

Smiler shook his head in a dogged way, for though he was decidedly disheartened at the prospect, yet he had enough of the bulldog in his composition to make him resolve not to admit that he knew his case was a hopeless one.

"Well, what is the use of making all this talk?" he exclaimed, in sullen anger.

"According to your showing we are all three booked for a trip up the river, so what is the use of chinning about the matter?"

"Why, it will save trouble if one of you will give the thing away," the superintendent replied.

"And then there is another point," the chief continued, after a moment's pause.

"As none of the stolen jewelry with the exception of this ring was found upon you

person, and every man pack of you had a big sum of money, it is proof positive that you succeeded in getting a fence to take the jewelry, and I have a strong desire to know the name of the man with whom you made the trade."

Smiler laughed outright in the face of the official, and his companions also indulged in sulky grins.

Although they knew they were in a bad plight, and felt almost certain that nothing could save them from "doing the State some service," yet it gave them a malicious pleasure to baffle the inquiry of the superintendent of police.

"We can't tell you what we don't know!" Smiler declared, defiantly.

"You may succeed in putting up a job on us so as to send us up the river, but we are innocent men, and don't know anything about this robbery."

"You will not give your fence away then?" the chief asked.

"Don't I tell you that we can't!" Smiler cried instantly.

"The law must take its course then," the chief declared, and then he ordered the prisoners to be conveyed to the Tombs.

CHAPTER XXVI.

TOMMY'S TRICK.

THE chief of police had not made any mistake in regard to the case of the three crooks.

The prosecuting attorney presented the evidence against the rascals in such a way that the jury brought in a verdict of guilty without leaving their seats.

And as the judge was one of the men who prided himself upon striking terror to the hearts of the criminal classes by the severity of his sentences he gave the trio as long a term in prison as the law permitted.

Swift punishment had followed the offense, but Miss Ragsdale had not recovered her property, with the single exception of the blue diamond, which she took, of course, although with a secret apprehension, for like the majority of the stage women she was inclined to be superstitious, and she was a little afraid that there was considerable truth in the notion that the beautiful jewel brought bad luck to whoever possessed it.

The crooks took their punishment with becoming resignation.

Although the jury by their verdict declared that they were the men who had stolen Miss Ragsdale's valuables, yet as only one of the jewels was found in their possession, that was all that was given back to the actress. The police had the money which the crooks possessed when they were arrested, and although everybody who knew anything about the affair was morally certain that the cash had been obtained by the sale of the diamonds, yet under the circumstances it was not possible for the law to take the money away from the men.

If the officers could have discovered the man who bought the diamonds—if they could have got hold of the fence, and seized the jewels, then, if the dealer had made a confession and admitted that he bought the stolen jewels, it might have been possible to have confiscated the crooks' moneys.

In a matter of this kind the chief took a personal pride; he hated to have these miserable crooks bid defiance to the power of the Police Department, and so he moved heaven and earth, as the saying is, to get at the man who had bought the stolen jewels.

Every dealer in New York who dealt in diamonds, from Tiffany's big jewelry store down to the meanest pawnshop in the city, was visited by the detectives, and the closest investigation made, but as the crooks would not reveal where they had disposed of the valuables, and one and all of the dealers protested that they knew nothing at all about the jewels, the police were baffled, so Miss Ragsdale was forced to go without her jewels.

It was the day after the one on which the crooks were tried and convicted.

They were on their way to Sing Sing, New York's famous prison, and Miss Ragsdale sat in her Long Branch cottage, contemplating the blue diamond, which had just been returned to her by the New York authorities.

Joe Phenix had brought the ring, and he, with Tommy Ragsdale, were seated in the actress's cozy parlor.

"I am very much obliged indeed to you, Mr. Phenix," the actress remarked, after the veteran detective had presented the ring. "But I can't say that I am particularly glad to get this ring back."

The detective was surprised by this announcement and said as much.

"Oh, it is all such utter rot, you know!" Tommy Ragsdale declared.

"My sister is superstitious, you understand, and she thinks this blooming stone brings bad luck," he continued.

"Well, it certainly did bring bad luck to the crooks who stole it from you, Miss Ragsdale," the detective remarked with a smile.

"Didn't it though?" the actress exclaimed. "Why, the quickness with which they were caught tried and sentenced was really wonderful!"

"Yes, in their case there wasn't any of the law's delays that people talk so much about," the detective remarked.

"The coves were regularly railroaded into the stone jug!" Tommy exclaimed.

"And it is very probable too that if they had not been foolish enough to retain this blue diamond it would not have been possible to have convicted them, so they may thank the jewel for their trip to Sing Sing."

"Well, I can tell you that I have made up my mind about the thing!" Miss Ragsdale exclaimed in a very decided way.

"This diamond is an unlucky stone, and there isn't a doubt in my mind about the matter."

"Just consider the affair for a moment," she continued.

"A few hours after the diamond came into my possession I was robbed, and it is the first time that I ever went through such an experience; then, though the men succeeded in escaping and turning their plunder into money, yet as by some strange chance they retained the ring it led to their conviction."

"Oh, there isn't the least doubt in my mind that the Hindoo fellow was right when he declared it was an unlucky stone!" the actress exclaimed in conclusion.

"This Hindoo of whom you speak was acquainted with the history of the diamond?" Joe Phenix asked, his curiosity excited.

"Oh, yes, but I will tell you all about it, and then you can judge for yourself," the actress said.

"If it would not be too much trouble I would be obliged," Joe Phenix remarked.

"What has been said about the matter has excited my interest and I would like to hear the particulars."

"I would just as lief tell you, although I suppose you will think that I am silly to pay any attention to the story," the actress remarked.

Then Miss Ragsdale related how it was that she came in possession of the ring.

It was a little awkward for her to explain that it was a parting gift from the man whom she had materially helped to ruin, but as her conscience did not trouble her much, she managed to get through that part of the story without much embarrassment.

Then she came to the Hindoo, and faithfully related all that the man had said.

"You will think I am very credulous, I suppose," she said in conclusion. "But it is my opinion that there is a deal of truth in the story, and I am not going to tempt providence by keeping this blue diamond."

"If you think there is any truth in the tale I certainly would not retain the jewel, for your peace of mind is worth something," Joe Phenix replied.

"It is all utter rot!" Tommy Ragsdale declared. "I don't believe there is a word of truth in the yarn, and if you will give the ring to me I will be glad to wear it."

"Oh, yes, you are very brave, Tommy!" the actress exclaimed in a spiteful way.

"And I have half a mind to allow you to have the ring. Then if you got your neck broke or somebody shot you I wouldn't be troubled by you any more."

"Ah, yes, if you are going to put it that way I can go and jump overboard!" the brother exclaimed sulkily.

"You wouldn't dare!" the actress exclaimed, tauntingly.

"Yes, I would dare, but I wouldn't give you the satisfaction of knowing that you had driven me to do such a thing!" Tommy exclaimed with a great deal of dignity.

The actress gave a scornful sniff then turned her attention to the detective.

"Under the circumstances then I think the best thing I can do is to return the ring to Mr. Van Courtlandt?" Miss Ragsdale remarked.

"Yes, if I was in your place I should certainly do so," the detective replied. "I assuredly would not retain the jewel if the fact that it was in my possession was going to cause uneasiness."

"That settles it!" the actress exclaimed. "I will get rid of it immediately."

"Tommy, you take the ring to Mr. Van Courtlandt, tell him I am very much obliged, but I would prefer not to retain it any longer."

"I have got a good excuse for wanting to get rid of it. It has been stolen once, and now that I have got it back I am not willing to run the risk of having it stolen again."

"That is a plausible story," Joe Phenix remarked.

"Of course you can do what you like, but I will be hanged if I would give the sparkler up if I had anything to say about it!" Tommy declared.

"Well, you haven't got anything to say, so just hold your tongue and do as I tell you!" Miss Ragsdale retorted.

"All right, just as you like," Tommy replied meekly.

"It is worth something to secure peace of mind," Joe Phenix remarked, as he took his departure.

Tommy left the house at the same time, but in the street the two separated, the detective proceeding to the railroad station, while Tommy started for the West End Hotel.

"It is a blooming shame, that is what it is!" the Englishman cogitated as he proceeded on his way.

"The idea of chucking away a sparkler like this, worth four or five thousand dollars of anybody's money, just because that Hindoo duffer got off a lot of rot about its being an unlucky stone!"

And in this strain the man proceeded, communing with himself until the hotel was reached.

A surprise awaited him!

When he inquired at the office for Van Courtlandt he was informed that the gentleman had just departed for New York.

"You might be able to catch him by going to the station if you desired to see him upon any important matter," the clerk remarked when Tommy expressed his regret at having missed him.

Then the clerk took a look at the clock.

"No, I am wrong about that," he added.

"You would not be able to catch him, there isn't time."

"I'm sorry," Tommy observed, as he turned away.

But this was not the truth, for the Englishman was glad that he had missed seeing the young New Yorker.

When he found that Van Courtlandt was gone an idea had come to him.

Why could he not retain the ring and allow the actress to believe that he had given it to Van Courtlandt?

The trick could be worked easily enough. All he had to do was to lie a little about the matter.

When she inquired he could say "Yes," he had given the ring.

Van Courtlandt had gone to New York, it was not likely that Miss Ragsdale would see him again, and so there was small chance of the fraud being discovered.

CHAPTER XXVII.

A PROPOSITION.

RAGSDALE chuckled merrily to himself as he took his way from the hotel, with the blue diamond snugly stowed away in an inside pocket of his vest.

"I might just as well collar a little bit of money out of this diamond business as not!" he remarked.

"The chances are a thousand to one that Van Courtlandt will never ask Dolly for the gem, and all I will have to do is to wait until I get at a good safe distance from New York—down South, or over on the Pacific Coast—then I can knock the stone out of the setting and get a good wad of money for it."

"And, after the stone is sold, and I have

got the cash stowed safely away, suppose Van Courtlandt should take it into his head to want the sparkler?"

For a few minutes he walked on in silence, musing over this problem.

"Well, s'pose he does come and kick up a row?" he exclaimed, abruptly. "Can't I swear that I left the diamond with one of the hotel clerks to give to him—left it all wrapped up carefully so no one would know what it was?"

"Why wouldn't a yarn of that sort go down? Who can prove that it isn't the truth?"

Then the man shook his head in a defiant way.

"Nobody could prove that it wasn't so, and the blame would all go on the hotel clerk. He was the man who got away with the sparkler!"

"Van Courtlandt wouldn't be apt to raise much of a row, anyway, and if he did, nobody couldn't do anything to me;—but he wouldn't try, for he isn't that kind of a man."

"He doesn't care for the diamond, and I might as well have the money it will bring. I will risk the ill-luck of holding the stone, for I don't believe in any such foolishness!"

By this time Tommy had reached the gate of Miss Ragsdale's cottage and there he encountered Fitzmaurice.

"Is your sister at home?" the manager asked.

"Yes, or she was awhile ago, and I don't think she has gone out," Tommy answered.

The appearance of Miss Ragsdale at the door solved the question immediately.

She smiled sweetly at the manager, as the two came up the walk, and then cast an inquiring glance at Tommy.

"It is all right!" Tommy exclaimed, giving utterance to the falsehood in the most unblushing manner. "I attended to the matter, and as the party is off for New York you will not be apt to see anything more of him."

"If you are speaking of Van Courtlandt I can give you some particulars in regard to him which I think will rather astonish you," the manager remarked.

By this time the gentlemen had arrived at the steps which led to the veranda.

"It is only natural that I should take a lively interest in all that appertains to that gentleman, and so I will be glad to hear any news concerning him," the actress replied.

"But, come into the house," she continued. "There you can speak freely."

The gentlemen followed Miss Ragsdale into the parlor, and, after they were comfortably seated, Fitzmaurice began:

"Van Courtlandt has succeeded in surprising all his friends and acquaintances."

"Is it possible?" the actress exclaimed.

"What has the blooming duffer been and gone and did?" Tommy asked.

The brother of the famous burlesque actress was not noted for his refinement.

"Hold your tongue, Tommy!" Miss Ragsdale enjoined, in an imperious way. "You never open your mouth but what you put your foot in it!"

"Oh, yes; you are always lecturing a fellow—going at him fit to snap his head off!" the brother retorted, indignantly.

"That is because you haven't any sense," the actress rejoined; "but if you would keep quiet people wouldn't know what a donkey you are!"

"Yes, as I said, Van Courtlandt has astonished everybody," Fitzmaurice interrupted.

"You know how he was situated?"

"Yes, he was a ruined man," the actress replied. "He felt so sure that his horse Doldale, would win the Monmouth Cup that he staked his all upon the venture."

"Worse than that, if the current gossip of the clubs can be believed!" the manager declared. "He felt so certain about the matter that he bet a fortune upon the result."

"But the horse did *not* win, and it was the common talk in the club-rooms, and in sporting circles, that Van Courtlandt had been so hard hit he would not be able to meet his liabilities."

"I suspected as much from what he said to me, although he was not the kind of man to talk much about such matters," Miss Ragsdale remarked, in a thoughtful way.

"I will do him the justice to say that he never showed the white feather—never,

you understand, evinced any particular concern in regard to the result."

"Van Courtlandt comes of the old New York stock, you know, the kind of men who, if they are foolish enough to contract debts of honor which they can not pay would be very likely to settle the affair by blowing out their brains," the manager explained with a deprecatory shrug of his shoulders.

"Yes, I do not doubt that he would be just the kind of fellow to end the struggle in that way," the actress assented.

"Well, as I was saying, it was the expectation of those who knew Van Courtlandt that he could not meet his losses, and that something dreadful would happen," the manager continued. "But, to the surprise of everybody, he came up to the scratch like a man, met every obligation promptly, and never asked for a moment's grace, although a number of his old friends—some of them his heaviest creditors, too—would have been only too glad to have given him time, if such an accommodation would have been of any assistance to him."

"I am astonished!" Miss Ragsdale declared. "And I don't understand it at all, for he as good as told me that if Doldale lost the race, he was a ruined man."

"I say, Dolly, can it be possible that the blooming duffer was playing a game on you?" Tommy demanded.

"I cannot believe that possible," Miss Ragsdale declared.

"That same idea came to me but I didn't think it could be true," the manager assured.

"These high and mighty swells are just the ones to try a game of that kind," Tommy asserted. "You see, you didn't say that you would marry him some time and he got tired of spending money on you; but he didn't exactly see how he could get out of it, and I suppose he was afraid that you might cut up rusty if he quit all of a sudden, so he arranged this race game and *you* did the quitting."

"I can't believe it!" the actress exclaimed, angrily; "not that I care two pins about the matter! I liked the man well enough, but not well enough to marry him."

"If you had married him you never would have got on together," Fitzmaurice assured, with the air of a judge.

"It is all wrong for a woman on the stage to marry one of those heavy swells," the manager went on, oracularly. "If the woman gives up her profession and retires to private life the chances are a hundred to one that she will not be satisfied, and if she keeps on acting, then the swell is always kicking about something or other."

"That is very true," the actress assented. "I knew very well that we wouldn't get on together; therefore I never really thought of wedding him; but, for all that, I don't relish the thought that he has played a trick upon me for the purpose of getting away."

"Of course, I don't go to the length of saying that he has," the speculator explained. "All I know about the matter is that the result of the race has apparently not ruined him, for he has paid his debts promptly, and has gone into partnership with Mr. Clairborne, and is going to take charge of one of the Southerner's big plantations."

"He is going to leave New York then?" the actress queried, evidently annoyed by the information.

"That is the report, and I think there is no doubt of its being true," Fitzmaurice replied.

"Afraid to remain in New York for fear that he will not be able to keep away from me!" the actress decided, with curling lip.

"Ah, that shows how prudent he is to run away from your fascinations!" the manager declared with a gallant bow.

"He can go if he wants to!" Miss Ragsdale cried in an angry way. "But, I don't relish the idea of being made a fool of by him, though I must admit that he played the game cleverly."

"No doubt about that!" Tommy asserted.

"He worked the trick for all it was worth."

"I did not care for the man's money; he had spent enough on me, and I was not anxious for him to go on, but I admit I am not pleased that he should have played any trick upon me, particularly, as there was no necessity for his doing anything of the kind."

"If he had wanted to break with me all he

had to do was to say so and I would not have put a straw in his way."

"But it does not matter," she concluded. "It is all over now, and the subject is hardly worth further discussing."

"Well, then, I will come down to business," the manager announced; "I didn't come here merely to tell you the idle gossip of the town. I came to say that I can put in a month at the Paragon Theater, commencing Monday two weeks, and if you don't mind acting during a few hot nights, there will be good money in it for us."

"By that time the cool nights will come. The last two weeks in August are generally cooler than the first two in September, and as they will give us seventy-five per cent for the show and printing, that is tempting terms for a popular New York theater to offer."

"All right! I will play!" the actress decided.

"Good!" Fitzmaurice responded.

And then they fell to discussing the business details.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A MYSTERIOUS AFFAIR.

Miss RAGSDALE, as arranged, made her appearance at the Paragon Theater, one of the leading amusement houses of New York, eleven days after her interview with Fitzmaurice, and a large audience welcomed the dashing burlesque queen.

Fitzmaurice, a skillful manager, not only presented the burlesque in a superb manner, as to scenery and costumes, but also had engaged an excellent company; hence the performance was an extra good one.

He had come behind the scenes during the play and jubilantly expressed his approval.

"It is a hit!" he declared. "You never acted better in your life, and everything else is up to the mark, too. We are in for some big business here, you may be sure of that!"

The actress expressed her delight at the pleasant prospect.

"This is the kind of life for me!" she declared. "I never shall think of retiring; from the stage again until I get so old that I have lost my attractiveness."

"It will be a good many years before that time will come!" the wily manager assured, with a gallant bow.

"Ah, you are a sad flatterer!" Miss Ragsdale exclaimed. "No wonder you get on in the world when you humor everybody to the top of their bent."

The successful performance closed; the burlesque queen resumed her street garb; and, accompanied by her maid and Tommy Ragsdale, got into her *coupe* and was driven to her home.

She had a house in one of the up-town cross streets—quite an establishment, with a stable attached. She lived in style, as befitted a lady who was popularly supposed to never make less than a thousand dollars a week.

It was Miss Ragsdale's custom to only partake of a light repast at supper time, so as to keep her voice in good order, but she made up for this by having a hearty meal after the performance with a goodly allowance of English ale.

Tommy always shared the meal with her. "Fitzzy said the show was a hit to-night," the actress remarked, leisurely sipping her ale.

"Oh, yes, everything went well, and as smooth as clockwork," Tommy responded, "and about all the regulars were on hand, I noticed."

"Yes, I recognized a number of familiar faces. By the way, wasn't Van Courtlandt in front?" the actress asked, abruptly.

"Yes, I was talking with him."

"What did he have to say for himself?"

"Not much. I encountered him in a crowd in the lobby and so didn't have much chance for conversation."

"Is it true that he is going South with this Mr. Clairborne?"

"No doubt about it, for I heard him tell a friend that he would leave for New Orleans on Thursday next."

"I did not know but what he had already left town, as I haven't seen anything of him. He has apparently got over his little infatuation for me," with a cynical laugh.

"Oh, yes, evidently."

"I have been in town now for over a week and he has not attempted to see me."

"Well, you haven't any call to complain, for you must do him the justice to say that he ponied up the cash like a major while he was dancing attendance on you."

"Oh, yes; that is all right. I haven't any complaints to make on that score," the actress replied, betraying her pique; "but it is not flattering to my vanity to think that the man can give me up at a moment's warning, and be able to go on his way without apparently bestowing on me a second thought."

"Just like all you women!" the brother rejoined; "you are never satisfied with anything. You did not really care anything for the man—that is, you wasn't anxious to marry him?"

"No, certainly not!" the actress replied in a spiteful way.

"What is the use of your asking such a question as that when you know very well that I never had any such idea in my head?"

"How can I tell what ideas you have?" Tommy demanded. "You don't take me into your confidence half the time; you treat me more like a servant than anything else, but I am not kicking, as these Yankees say."

"Well, you need not trouble your head about the matter. I am satisfied as I am, and I am not going to change. I don't want the man; but for all that, it is not particularly complimentary to think that the fellow can march off and forget me at a moment's notice."

"But there, we will not talk any more about the matter," Miss Ragsdale added, abruptly. "The man has gone out of my life—the incident is at an end, and we will not say any more about it. Now I will be off to bed, for I am tired."

The actress's bedroom was a beautifully-furnished apartment on the second floor.

With the assistance of her maid, she disrobed; then the girl retired, and the burlesque actress sought her couch and was soon asleep.

She began to dream immediately, and the dreams were disagreeable ones.

Suddenly she awoke with a start.

A cold hand had been laid upon her forehead.

Thanks to the gas-light she was able to see that a man was seated upon the edge of the bed!

He was dressed in dark clothes and his face was covered by a black mask.

In his hand he held a broad mouthed vial; the cork was absent, and as the actress opened her eyes he extended the bottle toward her nostrils and she could distinctly smell the pungent odor of a strange perfume which came from the vial.

Though bewildered by this strange incident the actress yet retained self-possession enough to notice that it was a dark-skinned hand which held the bottle.

Evidently the intruder was not a white man!

"Pray do not attempt to give an alarm," the masked man warned, as soon as he perceived that the actress was awake.

The voice was a peculiar one—low, soft and with a foreign intonation, and the moment the man spoke Miss Ragsdale was certain that she had heard the voice before, but at the moment could not remember where.

"If you will obey the injunction no harm will come to you," the stranger continued; "but if you are unwise enough to attempt an alarm I shall dash the contents of this bottle on your face, and the mixture will not only stupefy but will also absolutely destroy the beauty of which you are so proud. If that happens you will creep through life with a face so dreadful to look upon that men will flee at your approach."

As we have stated, the actress was a coward at heart, and when these awful words fell upon her ears she trembled in every limb.

"I will not attempt to give an alarm," she murmured with white lips.

"You are wise!"

"But what do you want?"

"The blue diamond!"

"The blue diamond!" echoed Miss Ragsdale in utter amazement.

"Yes, the precious stone stolen from the golden god in the land of Ind," the masked man replied. "I am a priest of the temple wherein reigns the golden god who once pos-

sessed blue diamond eyes," he explained. "Sacrilegious hands stole the treasures, but a curse has followed all into whose hands the diamonds came."

"One of the diamonds has been recovered and is now again in the possession of the temple, but the other was carried across the seas to the New World, and two of us priests of the temple have been commissioned to recover the precious stone."

"It is not yours—no one has a title to it but the golden god; so give it up, and by so doing avert misfortune, for, as sure as there is a sky above us, no mortal can possess the blue diamond and enjoy good fortune."

Miss Ragsdale did not attempt to dispute this statement; she was satisfied it was true.

"But, I haven't got it!" she averred. "I was afraid to keep it, and so sent it back to Mr. Van Courtlandt, by my brother Tommy."

And then she fainted.

When she revived from herswoon she was alone.

CHAPTER XXIX.

ON THE SCENT.

It was true, the report that Fitzmaurice had heard concerning Van Courtlandt.

Clairborne's business had become so extensive that he was obliged to employ managers, as it was not possible for him to attend to every detail in person.

He had been bothered, too, to get competent men, for he was obliged to delegate considerable responsibility to his subordinates.

And a few days after he had come to Van Courtlandt's rescue, he had received word from his chief superintendent that he desired to retire.

He was an Englishman, and important business called him home.

Clairborne happened to mention to the journalist, Kinsade, that he would be obliged to look for a new manager or overseer, and that gentleman at once suggested Van Courtlandt.

"He is a college-bred man, with a splendid education, and though he has never had much business training, yet as he is an uncommonly bright fellow there isn't any doubt that he would speedily become familiar with all the details."

"The idea is a capital one!" Clairborne declared, well impressed with the suggestion.

"If he will go there will be a chance for him to carve out a new fortune," the Creole continued.

"You are right; and I fancy he will not be sorry to have a change of scene. Suppose you sound him and see what he thinks about the matter."

"Certainly! I will be glad to do it, for I consider that I will be doing him a service."

The journalist was as good as his word, for he made it his business to hunt up the young New Yorker and present the scheme to him.

Van Courtlandt was delighted to get the chance.

"The very thing I wanted!" he declared, full of enthusiasm. "I was just speculating in regard to getting something to do, for I had made up my mind not to be an idler any longer."

Kinsade lost no time bringing him to the Creole and the arrangement was quickly made.

"I shall be out of temptation in the far South," Van Courtlandt assumed, with a sad smile, "and amid new scenes and new faces I hope to forget the follies of my past life."

"Well, you have had your lesson; all men get one sooner or later; and if you don't profit by it, you are not the kind of fellow I take you to be!" the journalist declared.

"I do not doubt that I will," Van Courtlandt replied; "and I surely needed the lesson. But I am cured now!" the New Yorker asserted.

"Entirely cured, eh? No danger of a relapse?" the journalist asked, in a joking way.

"Not the slightest! I am satisfied that my idol is nothing but common clay, and the spell of the enchantment has vanished, never to return."

"That is good! and I congratulate you upon the return of reason!" Kinsade encouraged.

"By the way, she is going to play at the Paragon next Monday."

"Yes, I saw the announcement in one of the newspapers; and as a proof that I am thoroughly cured of my infatuation I ask both of you gentlemen to attend the performance with me and see for yourselves that I am no longer under the siren's spell."

"We will go, eh, Clairborne?" the journalist asked.

"Certainly!" the Creole assented. "But I say, gentlemen, it is a wonder to me that this stage beauty did not capitulate when Mr. Van Courtlandt laid such close siege to her. I should have thought that the prospect of marrying such a man would have made her eager to give up her stage life."

"Yes, it does seem strange," Van Courtlandt observed, "for I will have to admit, gentlemen, that I most certainly would have married her if she had chosen to accept my hand."

"It isn't really right to tell tales out of school," the newspaper man now replied; "yet in this instance I am going to do it. But, gentlemen, I rely upon you not to mention the matter. What I am about to tell you is only known to a few old English professionals, one of whom imparted it to me in strict confidence."

"Miss Dolly Ragsdale couldn't very well marry you, or anybody else at present, without running the risk of getting her charming person into a jail, for the fact is she is already married."

"Oh, is that possible?" Van Courtlandt exclaimed.

"And this so-called brother, Mr. Thomas Ragsdale, is not her brother at all but her husband."

Van Courtlandt pondered over the matter for a few moments.

"It is all right, I am fair game—I acknowledge the corn," the young New Yorker replied with a smile.

The three attended the opening performance of the burlesque troupe, and Van Courtlandt watched the movements of the woman with interest, but his pulse was not quickened in the least; the spell was broken.

Van Courtlandt, the next morning had just finished his breakfast and gone to the reading-room to take a look at the morning papers, when a servant brought a card with the message that a gentleman desired a private interview.

ALI NANA.

Such was the name inscribed on the card, and Van Courtlandt read it aloud.

"He looks like a foreigner, sir," the servant remarked.

"Yes, he is one, to judge from his name," the young man assented. "I haven't any idea of what he wants but will see him."

The man ushered the stranger into Van Courtlandt's presence.

It was the tall, stately Hindoo whom the theatrical manager had introduced to Miss Ragsdale, and who had told the tale of the precious eyes of the golden god.

The man was dressed in a dark suit, and had the peculiar courtly bearing common to the educated men of his race.

"You will excuse my calling upon you, I trust," the Hindoo said in his smooth, pleasant way, and with a polite bow. "But I come on a matter of business."

"I am entirely at your service, sir," Van Courtlandt replied.

"As I am a stranger in this country, I was forced to introduce myself," the Hindoo explained, with another ceremonious bow.

"I am making a collection of rare precious stones and I was told that you had an odd blue diamond mounted in a ring."

"I did have it, but presented it to Miss Ragsdale, the burlesque actress," Van Courtlandt replied, somewhat surprised.

"And did she not return the ring to you?" the other asked.

"No, sir, she did not."

"There is some mistake about the matter, for Miss Ragsdale certainly said that she sent the ring back to you by Mr. Thomas Ragsdale, her brother."

"That may be the truth. She may have sent the ring to me by her brother, but I never received it. Did Mr. Ragsdale say that I did?" and there was a little heat in Van Courtlandt's manner as he spoke.

"Oh, no, I have not seen him; there is some mistake, but I will call upon the

gentleman. You understand, I have a curiosity to see this rare stone. Excuse me for disturbing you."

"Don't mention it, sir."

And then the Hindoo departed.

"Has Master Tommy been up to any game?" Van Courtlandt questioned. "It looks like it, but it matters not to me, for I take no interest in the blue diamond."

CHAPTER XXX.

TOMMY MEETS A FRIEND.

It was the morning of the day which followed the night on which the burlesque queen made her appearance at the Paragon Theater, and about eleven o'clock Mr. Tommy Ragsdale made his appearance at the box-office of the amusement temple.

It was his custom to drop into the theater during the morning for the purpose of getting his sister's mail.

By the way, we will take this opportunity to satisfy the reader's curiosity in regard to the relationship of the burlesque actress and Mr. Thomas Ragsdale.

The story that the veteran journalist had heard was the truth, Tommy *was* the actress's husband and not her brother!

It was the old story.

The charming burlesque queen was not as young as she looked by a dozen years.

She was, apparently, about twenty-five; in reality she was nearly forty, but was one of those women who do not show their age.

Then, too, the lady took wonderfully good care of herself, and as she had plenty of money, and was able to provide herself with all the little necessities which help to make a woman look young, it was no wonder that she seemed to defy the ravages of time.

The two had been members of the same company of actors in England, a "barn-storming" organization, to use the *argot* of the stage; that is, of a small inferior company, picking up a precarious hand-to-mouth living by visiting the country towns where the large, theatrical troupes never perform.

Tommy was the "low comedian" of the company, and being a tolerably good actor received the only salary which amounted to anything in the party.

The now famous burlesque queen was the daughter of a small farmer, and happened to visit the theater one night when the traveling troupe played in the market town near which her home was situated.

She fell in love with the "funny man," succeeded in making his acquaintance, and, finally, ran away from home to marry him.

Ragsdale was a prudent, thrifty fellow, and put his wife on the stage at once so that she could earn her living.

The girl had a natural genius for the profession and rose rapidly.

From the barn-storming troupe she went into one of the London minor theaters, made a hit in the burlesque at Christmas time, and from that day her position on the stage was assured.

Ragsdale was sharp-witted enough to see that his wife would be much more popular with the "Johnnies," as the young society dudes are commonly termed, who are such good patrons of the theater when the burlesque shows are on the boards, if these rattle-brained young men believed that she was a single woman.

So he transformed himself from the husband into a brother, and only a few of the old professionals, who had known the pair in their barn-storming days, were aware of the real relationship of the two.

There was a round dozen of letters for the actress, but the experienced eye of Ragsdale, as he examined the mail, speedily detected that none of them amounted to anything.

The majority were tradesmen's letters recommending their wares, and a few "mash" notes, as the epistles are called, written by weak-minded men, who are idiots enough to think that an actress will pay any attention to love letters from entire strangers.

As Ragsdale came out of the box-office he encountered the Hindoo fakir, Ali Nana.

"Hello, old man, how goes it?" he exclaimed.

The Hindoo bowed in his courtly way, shook hands with the Englishman, and expressed the delight which he experienced in seeing him again.

"Have you got an opening yet?" Ragsdale inquired.

"Yes, I go on at the Monmouth Dime Museum next week."

"That is good; but do those cribs pay any money?"

"Oh, yes, a fair salary—twenty-five a week."

"Well, that is just about half what you ought to get," Ragsdale remarked.

"Ah, but you must remember that I am a stranger in this country, and the people do not really know what I can do," the Fakir urged.

"Yes, that is very true."

"And it will be a stepping stone to something else."

"You have got the right idea!" Ragsdale declared. "You must get an opening somewhere, and after the manager sees what your act is like you will not have any trouble in getting engagements."

"I think not, for my act is a good one and different from the usual run."

"Well, I wish you luck, old man?" Ragsdale exclaimed.

"Will you have a drink?" he continued, in a lordly way.

"Thank you, I do not mind."

Then the two went into the nearest saloon and had a glass of ale.

And while they were drinking, the Hindoo confided to the Englishman that he was short of cash from being out of work so long, but he had a diamond pin which cost him twenty pounds in London, about equal to a hundred American dollars, and he would be glad to sell the pin for fifty.

Ragsdale, priding himself upon being a good judge of diamonds, always on the lookout for a bargain, responded:

"Well, I don't suppose it will do any harm to take a look at the sparkler."

"But really, you know, if you paid twenty pun's for it in Lunnun, you couldn't expect to get more than thirty dollars for it on this side of the herring pond."

"But that isn't one-third!" the Fakir argued.

"Yes, I know it, but my experience has taught me that when a man is in such a situation that he has got to get rid of a diamond he is mighty lucky to be able to get over a quarter for it."

"Well, I must dispose of it, and as you are a judge of stones, and I know you will deal honestly with me, I will give you the first chance at the pin," the Hindoo remarked in his gentle, insinuating way.

"I will take a look at the sparkler, it will not do any harm," Ragsdale remarked in an indifferent tone. "But as I said, I don't know as I care to invest unless you can give me the biggest kind of a bargain."

"Come with me, and you can soon see for yourself. I have a furnished room in a lodging-house only five minutes' away."

"Proceed, old man, I'm with you!" Ragsdale replied.

Then the two set out, the crafty Tommy chuckling at the sharpness he had displayed.

As the Hindoo had said, his room was within a few minutes' walk of the theater.

It was in an old-fashioned two-storied brick house, on one of the up-town cross streets. The room was a dingy apartment, a rear basement, with access to it by the basement door.

"This is a queer old crib," Ragsdale remarked as he followed the Hindoo in. "From the looks of this house outside I should not imagine that anybody lived here."

"I am the only occupant of the house," the Fakir replied.

"Why, that is strange!" Ragsdale exclaimed. "I don't understand—"

But the speech was suddenly interrupted by the Hindoo whipping out an ugly-looking dagger, a long, slender-bladed affair, which he flourished before the amazed eyes of the Englishman.

"Sit down and don't utter a sound or I will slit your throat open with as little mercy as though you were a rat!" the Fakir cried.

Tommy Ragsdale had never been renowned for his courage, and when the glittering knife was flashed before his astonished eyes, and the threatening words fell upon his ears, his strength seemed to fail him, his legs trembled and then he sank into a chair, really unable to stand.

"Take warning! If you attempt to give an alarm I will kill you without mercy!" the Hindoo declared.

"Wha—what do you mean by this game?" Tommy asked in a trembling voice.

"If you will be sensible, and do as I wish, no danger will befall you; but if you are obstinate and headstrong then your blood will be on your own head," the Fakir declared.

"I am willing to do anything in reason, but I don't understand what you are driving at," the frightened Tommy protested.

"You know me only as the wandering Fakir, Ali Nana, and by the use of the juggling tricks which I learned for amusement long years ago in my native land, I have been able to make a living wandering in these strange countries among men whom I despise."

"Years ago, though, I was a priest in the temple of the golden god; the ravages of war drove all of us sacred men out into the world; but now the rightful ruler of the kingdom has come to his own again, and the English Government has made peace with him."

"Once again the towers of the temple of the golden god pierce the sky, and the worshipers kneel before the shrine."

"I have not obeyed the call to return and serve again within the temple."

"I was fool enough to fall in love with a fair-haired daughter of the stranger, and for her sake I renounced the land of my fathers."

"But, she is gone—fled in the night with a man of her own race, and I am free to return, but there is the stain of disobedience upon me and I must do something to remove it."

"You know the story of the blue diamond—if I could carry that jewel back, all my sins would be forgiven."

And then the Fakir bent on the hapless Tommy such a baleful look that it fairly made Ragsdale's teeth chatter with fright.

"You have the blue diamond—give it to me!" the Hindoo demanded, and extended his left hand, while the right threatened the frightened Englishman with the dagger.

"I—I—I gave it to Mr. Van Courtlandt," Tommy stammered.

"You are a liar!" the Hindoo declared.

"Your sister gave you the ring to carry to the young man, but you never delivered it!"

"Oh, mercy, mercy!" moaned Ragsdale, almost beside himself with fear.

"Wretch—dog! I have a good mind to slice your lying tongue from its roots!" the Fakir cried.

Tommy tumbled from the chair onto his knees.

"Oh, spare me, and I will give it to you," Ragsdale cried.

"Be quick!"

Tommy produced the ring from an inside pocket, where he had it securely hidden.

As soon as the Hindoo had it in his possession, he thrust his hand into his pocket, then cast some dust-like substance into Ragsdale's face.

Tommy tumbled over as though he had been shot.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE MISSING MAN.

MISS RAGSDALE, after the habit of many ladies of her profession, was a late riser.

She usually had breakfast about ten o'clock, making a hearty meal, for, like the majority of English women, she prided herself upon being a "good feeder."

The burlesque queen was solicitous regarding the notices in the newspapers respecting her reappearance, and when she parted with Fitzmaurice after the opening performance, she begged him to come in during the morning and tell her how the critics regarded the "show."

But, she couldn't wait for the manager's appearance, so sent out for half a dozen of the morning newspapers, and read the critical articles while she ate her breakfast.

All the notices were quite favorable; and so, when Fitzmaurice arrived, a little after one o'clock, he found the "artiste" in excellent humor.

"Sorry I could not come before, but I have been awfully busy," he explained.

"I thought possible you would be detained, and so I sent out and got the newspapers," Miss Ragsdale observed.

"Not a bad notice in the lot!" the politic manager declared, rubbing his hands gleefully as he helped himself to an easy chair.

"I am always nervous about the first night," the actress averred.

"Ah, yes; so much depends upon it; but

everything went nicely, and, as I have always done my best to keep on good terms with these 'molders of public opinion,' I did not think any of them would go out of their way to 'roast' the show," Fitzmaurice remarked with a complacent smile.

"You know how to work the oracle about as well as any man I ever met!" Miss Ragsdale assured—and that isn't taffy, you know, but my honest opinion."

"Well, I certainly ought to know, if I don't," the manager returned. "I have been engaged in this sort of thing for a good thirty years and if I hadn't found out how to please the public I would have become a back number, long ago."

"And, it strikes me you have made as much money as any of them," the burlesque queen added, suggestively.

"One thing is sure: I have kept what money I was lucky enough to make," with a shrewd smile. "It isn't what a man gains, you know, that makes him rich. It is what he saves; that tells the tale."

"True enough," Miss Ragsdale assented.

"And now, if you haven't got anything in particular to make you hurry away, stay and have dinner with me. It will be ready in a half-hour or so."

"I shall be delighted," the manager acquiesced. "As it happens, my time is my own until about four this afternoon."

"Then stay here and partake of my feed. I can give you a good dinner for I am rather proud of my cook," Miss Ragsdale boasted.

"By the way, did you see anything of Tommy to-day?"

"Yes; he came to the theater this morning while I was there and got the mail."

"When he went out he said he would get my letters, then he was going to his tailor to see about some clothes, and he ought to have been here long ago," and as she spoke the actress looked at the clock on the mantel-piece, which indicated a quarter to two.

"Well, he is rather behind time," Fitzmaurice observed; "and that reminds me! Fifteen or twenty minutes after he got the mail I came out of the theater and saw him going up the street with that Hindoo juggler I introduced to you at Long Branch."

Miss Ragsdale uttered a cry of surprise.

"Ah, it has just come to me!" she ejaculated, as if in some alarm; at which Fitzmaurice looked surprised.

"I knew I had heard the man's voice before, but I could not remember where or when; now I can place him!" the actress added.

Then she related the story of the mysterious nocturnal visitor who had been in quest of the blue diamond, and wound up by declaring that she was certain that the Hindoo was the man who had given her such a fright.

"Well, upon my word, this is one of the strangest affairs that ever came to my knowledge!" the manager asserted.

"Do you know anything about the man?" queried the actress, betraying her excitement.

"No, not much. I know he is a Hindoo, and a good performer; he always seemed to be a quiet, gentlemanly fellow; still, he may be the rascal of the world, for all that."

"I am terribly afraid that something has happened to Tommy!" Miss Ragsdale now exclaimed, and showing a real anxiety.

"Well, even admitting that the fellow is a rogue, I don't see why he should harm your brother," the manager protested; "for according to your story the Fakir is after the blue diamond; but as Tommy delivered the stone to Mr. Van Courtlandt, it is that gentleman whom the juggler should pursue, not Tommy."

"But he may have got the idea that Tommy has the jewel, and from my experience with the man I am satisfied he would not hesitate to murder to get the jewel."

"I am sure there is something wrong or else Tommy would come!" the actress continued. "I must have the matter looked into at once. May I trouble you, Mr. Fitzmaurice, to summon that detective—that Mr. Phenix—and give the case into his hands, immediately?"

"Certainly!" the manager responded. "I will telephone him at once, if you so desire."

"I do—oh, I do!" excitedly. "I am sure, now, that something has happened to Tommy. He would not have remained away if something had not occurred, and I have a presentiment that Hindoo has something to do with it. So do let Mr. Phenix be called."

"All right!" acquiesced the manager and he at once proceeded to the duty of summoning the great man-hunter, with the result that, Joe Phenix, in an hour's time, was on the track of the missing man.

But even Joe Phenix could not perform impossibilities. He traced the Hindoo and Tommy from the theater to the saloon; then he ascertained that they went up Broadway; after that—nothing!

The two had disappeared as completely as though they had sunk into the earth or gone up into the air.

But, as the detective veteran now conjectured that it was the blue diamond which the Hindoo sought, he promptly visited Van Courtlandt, and from that gentleman received the intelligence that the stone in reality never had been delivered to him, and the young New Yorker then told of his interview with the Fakir.

"Ragsdale evidently pocketed the jewel, and the natural conclusion is that the Hindoo has pocketed him!" Joe Phenix concluded.

No trace was gained of Tommy until the afternoon of the second day, when a postal card came to Miss Ragsdale.

As it happened, she was in consultation at the theater with Fitzmaurice and Joe Phenix at the time.

"Here is a clue!" she exclaimed, joyfully. A single line only was written on the card.

"Seek him at 950 East Thirty-first street!"

A coach was called and the three set out. And there in the cellar of the dwelling the missing Tommy was found.

He was handcuffed and his ankles also fettered.

The cellar was dimly lighted by a grating in the rear, a bottle of water and a loaf of bread had been provided; so, although Tommy had had a hard time of it, yet he was far from being a dead or injured man.

He had shouted himself hoarse for assistance but no one had heard him.

This discovery now aroused Phenix. To catch the Hindoo was his set purpose. But no Hindoo was found. Instead, the detective made the discovery that a ship had sailed for Calcutta, India, on the afternoon of the day that Tommy was trapped and the shrewd man-hunter conjectured that the Fakir had made his escape from the city on her, carrying the baleful jewel with him.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE FATAL END.

WHEN the detective made his report to the burlesque actress she was furious.

"Does this end the matter?" she cried. "Is my poor, dear Tommy to be almost killed by this tawny wretch and can no redress be obtained?"

"By this time the man is on the high seas, and even if he could be pursued, and overtaken, it would cost a deal of money," the detective answered.

"I don't care what it costs!" Miss Ragsdale cried. Will you not undertake to pursue and capture this barbarous wretch?"

"I am willing to make the attempt, of course, but I will not insure success."

"Of course not; but you can make a try for it, and if you fail I will not complain."

"All right! I will go ahead then. As it happens, I know a dozen wealthy men who own remarkably fast yachts, and I think it is possible I can obtain the use of a craft able to make eighteen or twenty miles an hour for a week's stretch, at a reasonable rate."

"Never mind the expense!" the blonde burlesquer urged; "I don't mind standing a thousand or two of dollars seeking for satisfaction. I will write you a check for a thousand now, and I want you to do your level best, as you Americans say!"

The actress filled out the check and gave it to the detective, who then rose to depart.

"Of course you understand that to trace a ship on the ocean—when it has obtained such a start as this craft has, is a good deal like hunting for a needle in a bundle of hay?"

"Oh, yes, I know that; but there is a chance, and I am willing to risk it. Make the attempt, and if you fail to overhaul the ship, I will have the satisfaction of knowing that I did all in my power to catch the tawny wretch."

"I will set about the matter at once!" and the veteran detective took his departure.

Joe Phenix had already picked out the

yacht most suitable for his purpose. It belonged to a wealthy banker with whom he had business relations for years, and by whom he was held in high esteem.

The morning newspapers announced that the banker had just returned from a cruise, and intended to put the yacht out of commission in a few days.

The tireless detective sought the banker, and when he explained the nature of his business found that the gentleman was only too glad to be able to accommodate him.

The banker, too, had some information in regard to the Calcutta ship. There had been a row on board of the craft, among the sailors, after she had got under way, so that the harbor police had to interfere.

Five men were arrested, and the vessel was detained until new seamen could be shipped in place of the fellows under lock and key.

Thus it came about that the ship only had about ten hours' start, and as the winds were contrary, forcing the vessel to "beat" instead of proceeding in a straight course, the chance of the yacht overtaking the East India bound craft was good.

So the beautiful, trim yacht was placed under the great man-hunter's command and in a few hours was heading out through the Narrows, under a clear sixteen knot speed, for she was in truth, a "flyer."

By Phenix's order a sharp lookout was kept, and a reward offered to the man who should first catch sight of the craft.

The Calcutta ship was a barque, and on the morning of the second day, a vessel answering to her description was discovered by a sharp-eyed sailor.

The yacht immediately headed in her direction and soon Joe Phenix was satisfied that the vessel was the one he sought.

"This job will not be as troublesome as I imagined," Joe Phenix remarked to the captain of the yacht.

"You have been fortunate," the captain declared, "and I can promise that within half an hour your man will be in your hands."

"I think so," the veteran assented.

But he had not taken into consideration the baleful influence which the mysterious blue diamond seemed to exercise upon all who came in possession of it.

When the yacht was within a mile of the Calcutta craft and had signaled that he desired to board her, there came the sound of an explosion on board of the ship, and this report was quickly followed by flames.

Then, as if in hot haste, the ship's crew took to the boats.

But there was yet another explosion which literally rent the ship asunder, wrecking her utterly, the fragments strewn the sea.

The yacht, now close at hand, picked up the boats, and as the men crawled on board, Joe Phenix watched eagerly for the Hindoo.

He was not among the rescued!

To the detective's inquiries, no one had seen him.

The bloodhound was foiled, for the Hindoo and the blue diamond had gone to the bottom of the sea together—the stone a fatal one to the last.

THE END.

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